Boku wa Tomodachi ga Sukunai Volume 06

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These are novel illustrations that were included in Volume 6

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どんなに手強いメ切が来ようとも、このオレが必ず破ってみせるぜ！

【イラストレーター】

ブリキ

あ、歩くだけでも息が切……ます……歳で……ね。

カバーイラスト／ブリキ　装丁／blue

僕は友達が少ない 6

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MF文庫 J
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僕は友達が少ない⑥
平坂読

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僕は友達が少ない⑥

理科の発明品がきっかけで、夜空と小鷹の秘密が他の部員たちにもバレてしまった。『元友達』という（友達がいない人にとっては）極めて特別な関係を前にして、隣人部の人間関係にも変化が……!?　一方そのころ、学園の他の生徒たちは一ヶ月後に迫った学校生活最大のイベント、学園祭に向けて盛り上がっていた。いつかリア充になったときのため、隣人部も学園祭に向けて動き出――そうとするのだが……。例によって迷走を繰り広げる彼らは、果たして学園祭を成功させることができるのか!?　学園祭だけでなくリア充には不可避の「あのイベント」にまで果敢に挑戦する、大人気残念系青春ラブコメ第六弾、どこまでも残念に登場！

MF文庫 J 平坂読の本

- ホーンテッド!①〜④ [イラスト：片瀬優]
- ソラにウサギがのぼるころI〜IV [イラスト：茨ヒロム]
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- ねくろま 4。[イラスト：じろう]
- ねくろま 5。[イラスト：じろう]
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6

平坂読 Yomi Hirasaka

【Illustrator ブリキ】

森江春策

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Exposed

"...If it was a dream from ten years ago, then why was Yozora in it?"

A cold sweat ran down my cheeks upon hearing what Sena said .

After using the time machine Rika invented (which was actually not a time machine, but rather a device that uses hypnotism to make you see a dream about whatever you imagine), I saw a dream of ten years ago.

In the dream, I told Sora ——Yozora when she was younger—— the words I weren't able to when we parted that day.

The rest of it was all jumbled up and crazy, just like you'd expect from a dream, but being able to talk with Sora after ten years left me feeling satisfied.

However, in response to my words of thanks to Rika for letting me feel like I went back in time, Sena threw a question at me.

"Well?"

Sena's faintly accusatory gaze appeared to falter ever so slightly.

"Senpai?"

"Aniki."

Rika and Yukimura also looked over at me as though wanting to say something.

And as for Yozora, she'd retreated to the sofa a short distance away before I knew it, and was reading with an innocent look on her face.

Heyyyyyyyy!?

"......Umm, what are you talking about?"

I'll try to play dumb for now.

"Like I said, why was Yozora in your dream from ten years ago?
"

Sena repeated, not even trying to hide her obvious displeasure.

"Well, uh, you know... How do you guys even know what my dream was about anyway?"

"That would be because you said it out loud."

Yukimura was the one who answered my question.

"...So I was talking in my sleep?"

"Yes," said Yukimura and Rika with a little nod.

"Kodaka-senpai, you kept on yelling "Yozoraaa, Yozoraaa" with all your might while you were under the hypnosis."

"Seriously...?"

It's certainly true that I yelled Yozora's name with all my might in that dream I just had.

But who would've thought I was yelling in real life too...

I shot a quick glance over at Yozora to see what she was doing, but she still appeared to be acting as though she had nothing to do with this.

"W-well, it was just a dream after all! You hear about people you know randomly showing up in dreams every now and then... right?"

""""....."""

The three of them each shot me a dirty look after my failed attempt at throwing them off my trail.

I stood there and took their stares without budging; all the while a cold sweat was running down my head.

".....Hmmm..... It *is* true that this machine can't control your dreams perfectly, but..."

Rika said, albeit with an unsatisfied look on her face, so I decided to go with that.

"Yeah, that's it! It certainly did *feel* like a dream of ten years ago, but now that I think about it, it was actually pretty out there!! That ending was especially ridiculous!"

I did not tell even a single lie just now.

I mean, Sora came at me with a bowgun for crying out loud.

"...Well, it was clear Senpai was having a nightmare and all... So I guess that's it... I suppose I still have much more work to do on this machine..."

"Yeah, good luck with that, hahaha..."

Alright, looks like I managed to fool them... I think?

Right as I was starting to feel relieved,

"...Even so, I still don't like it... Why did it have to be Yozora..."

Sena murmured with a sullen expression on her face.

"S-Sena...?"

Sena redirected her upset look from me to Yozora.

"...What do you want, Meat?"

Yozora lifted her face up from the book to meet Sena's gaze.

She was wearing that trademark sour look of hers.

"You heard it too, right? What Kodaka said in his sleep, I mean."

"Yeah."

"Well? What do you think about it?"

Yozora's response to Sena's vague question, was——...

"It's not like it's weird for me to show up in one of Kodaka's dreams about ten years ago. We knew each other when we were kids after all."

She revealed the truth in one fell swoop, all too easily.

Sena opened her eyes wide, and Rika and Yukimura looked pretty shocked too.

I was just as taken aback as they were.

The day after summer break, when Yozora came back to school with her hair cut.

The day I realized she was my old best friend.

Yozora told me to keep the fact that we knew each other when we were little a secret from the rest of the Neighbors Club.

Hence, I'd kept it a secret up until now, and that is exactly why I was so flustered when Sena and Rika were asking me about what I said in my sleep just now...

.....Eh, what? Should I have just told them like it was nothing? What was the point of trying so hard to hide it...

I started staring over at Yozora's face, but all she did was go " Hmph." in response.

"K-knew each other...!? You and Kodaka did?"

Sena looked back and forth between Yozora's face and mine.

"That's right," Yozora answered curtly, before getting up off the sofa, and slowly walking over to me.

Yozora lined up right next to me, so close that our shoulders might have been touching, as Sena, Rika, and Yukimura each stared at us with bewildered looks on their faces.

Yozora then declared to the three girls,

"Kodaka and I used to play a lot together in this town ten years ago until he left. We were what you could call playmates, no——"

Yozora cut herself off mid-sentence, and shook her head before saying,

"We were '*friends*'."

Yozora clearly said, in a quiet voice that sounded as if she were provoking them.

"Fr... iends."

Sena repeated the word to herself as though grumbling.

"I-is that true?"

Yozora answered, "It's true," to Rika's question.

Rika then directed her gaze towards me.

"Kodaka-senpai..."

"...Ah, yeah, it's true."

I nodded in the affirmative.

"Why didn't you say anything!?"

Sena yelled, demanding an explanation from Yozora.

"No real reason, but it's not like there was any reason to tell you all about it either, right?"

Yozora calmly said with a nonchalant look on her face, giving Sena the exact same answer she gave me back when I asked about it.

"Kodaka and I were friends a long time ago. That's all there is to it."

Yozora faced Sena and declared after letting out a little huff, again in a voice tinged with provocation, almost as though she were boasting about it.

The way Yozora was talking sounded off, so I took a look over in her direction.

The corners of her mouth were turned up, forming the tiniest of smiles.

And, I got the feeling that her shoulders were shaking ever so slightly as well.

Yozora...?

"Muu..."

Sena groaned, seemingly unsatisfied with the whole state of affairs.

"...I'd always had a feeling, but you really are... were... friends... Hnnn..."

Rika murmured, a pensive expression on her face as well.

You had a feeling about it this whole time...? That's some crazy perceptiveness you've got there.

"Friends..."

Yukimura quietly said the word as well.

Friends.

The goal of our Neighbors Club is to "make friends."

Back when Yozora told me to keep the fact we were friends a secret from the rest of the club, I didn't really think there was any need to.

However, even though we merely "used" to be friends, the fact that Yozora and I were friends at all might have been, at the very least, to the rest of the Neighbors Club, a much more important fact than I'd ever imagined.

Footsteps of Horror (aka The School Festival)

It was the day after Sena and the rest learned of the fact that Yozora and I used to be friends.

Aside from everyone acting weird towards Yozora shortly after the fact, nothing else worthy of note happened.

We were all in the clubroom today after school, lazing around just as we always have.

Yozora and I were busy reading books.

Yukimura was in her butler uniform, sitting to my right as she spaced out like she always does.

Rika (whose hair was straight down and black today), was sitting to my left, going "Mufufu..." with a creepy smile on her face while watching an anime on her laptop.

I took a look over at it, and saw she was watching an intense battle scene between Ova #01 and a berserk Ova #04, but I have no clue why that would cause her to make that "Mufufu..." giggle.

Maria was busy working today as well, and apparently Kobato has to take supplementary lessons again today.

Sena was playing galge on the clubroom TV as usual.

It was a perfectly normal day at the Neighbors Club, with the sound of the school's brass band's music and sports clubs' shouting

coming from afar, the galge music coming from the TV, as well as the occasional creepy laugh from Rika and Sena as our background music.

Then, all of a sudden, the sound of an energetic anime girl going, "And so, we'll be running a maid cafe for the school festival ~!" entered my ears.

It should go without saying that it was the voice of a girl from the galge Sena was playing.

Normally I just let it fly in one ear and out the other, but it caught my attention on account of *a certain word* that was said.

"Oh yeah, it's about time for the school festival, isn't it..."

Upon finishing my sentence, Sena stopped moving her hands along the controller, Rika stopped turning the pages of a book in her hand, Yukimura grabbed the sleeve of my shirt, and Yozora raised her face from her book.

"...Kodaka... You just stepped on a land mine..."

Yozora said while looking at me with one eye half open.

"A-a land mine...!?"

Yozora seemed upset as she averted her eyes, and said,

"...No, it's nothing. There is no school festival, after all. I don't even know what those words mean, after all. Eh? What is that? Some foreign language? Or some kind of yankee slang?"

"No no no no, I know this school has a school festival too!"

I retorted to Yozora, who was saying a bunch of nonsense with a completely straight face.

The other day, during homeroom just a few days after our break after finals had ended, we had a discussion about the school festival.

I'm told that here at St. Chronica Academy, a three day long school festival is held annually.

The first day is an athletics festival, while the second and third are part of a cultural festival, which make up the entirety of what is called the "St. Chronica Academy School Festival".

The athletics festival involves only students of the academy, but the cultural festival is open to the general public, so apparently that's where an overwhelming amount of excitement lies.

The discussion was basically about what our class wanted to do for the cultural festival, and it was decided that we wouldn't be getting anything ready for it.

The freedom allotted regarding the cultural festival at this school is relatively high, allowing for classes, clubs, or even groups of friends to prepare things to do for the big day, and it sounds like

anyone who isn't doing anything is free to wander around doing whatever the day of.

I'd bet anything that the only reason our class isn't doing anything, is because everyone is too busy working on other projects with their clubs or friends. When our class rep asked, " Anyone who has a suggestion about what we should do for the cultural festival, please raise your hand," I got the feeling that a bunch of my classmates were all taking glances in my direction, but I'd like to believe that was no more than my imagining things.

By the way, this year's school festival starts in the middle of November, in other words, one month from now.

"...Kodaka."

Yozora said, in a very grave tone of voice.

"Hm?"

"...The school festival is an event made by normals, for normals. "

.....

"......You're exactly right."

I couldn't help but nod in agreement with her.

"So you get it now?"

"Sigh... our classes aren't really doing anything, and it's true that a big event like this has nothing to do with us, isn't it..."

"Exactly. So don't mention that certain big event anymore."

"What? We can't even mention it?"

Right after I said that, Sena jumped into the conversation.

"Hey! Don't lump me together with you guys! I did all kinds of stuff at the last school festival!"

"Oh, you did?"

I asked, prompting Sena to puff her chest out in pride.

"Heheh, a transfer student like you might not know, Kodaka, but Yozora, you saw me, right? You saw how amazing I was last year, didn't you!?"

"As if. Last year I faked being sick for those three days."

...That's Yozora for you, a diehard anti-social through and through.

"Kh! Useless woman...!"

As Sena was grinding her teeth in frustration, Rika spoke up.

"Ah, Rika saw you last year, Sena-senpai. On the first day of the athletics and cultural festivals."

"Heh?"

I did a double take after hearing Rika's surprising announcement.

"Why were you at the school festival last year? I thought you just enrolled this year."

"Sena-senpai's father gave me the invitation to this school personally, so I decided to take the chance to look around the school."

"Oh yeah, I forgot, but the chairman invited you to enroll here, didn't he?"

"Yes."

Rika, a famous person to those in the know, enrolled after being asked to by the chairman, Pegasus Kashiwazaki, and is a super VIP that even had her own personal room, called the "Rika Room", built for her. She's a total perv though.

"Hence, I watched last year's athletics festival from the guest seats. I got sick from being surrounded by so many people at the cultural festival though, so I spent the whole time resting in the gymnasium."

"Great, so you were there!"

Sena's mouth formed into a giant smile.

"Ok, then you can tell them all about how wonderful I was last year!"

"Uh-huh..."

Rika unenthusiastically nodded with a look of irritation on her face, and said,

"...I believe you participated in a lot of the events at the athletics festival. Back then I only saw "a blond haired girl with huge boobs who seems to really stand out a lot", but I'm pretty sure that was you, Sena-senpai."

"Yep yep, that's gotta be me! I ran in the 200 meter race, the scavenger hunt race, the obstacle race, the bread eating race, the marathon, and helped in the cavalry battle too, right!? I did all the events you could enter by yourself! I got first place in all of them too!"

Sena smiled triumphantly as she rattled off her achievements.

"That *is* pretty amazing, if it's true..."

"I know, right!?"

Rika then continued talking to Sena, who was getting even more inflated with her own pride.

"If I had to say yes or no, then I'd say yes, it was amazing, but... It was clear you were way more excited than everyone else, which really just made them look at you weird. Honestly, even Rika felt that way."

"Eh...!?"

Sena's face went completely stiff.

"Watching you in the cavalry battle was especially painful. The boys were the horses while the girls were the knights, but you looked like a beast gone mad with hunger as you clearly targeted other people whose horses weren't into it, and then stole their bandanas. There were even some people crying."

Uwaa... I can totally see her doing that.

"T-that's what a battle is, what do you want me to do about it!?"

Yozora then made an exasperated look and said to Sena, who was trying to argue back with tears in the corners of her eyes,

"...It's because this school is generally a more mild-mannered one. I hear that nobody really ever gets that excited for the athletics festival. Everyone thinks that the cultural festival is what the school festival is all about, and chooses to save their strength for that, rather than do something stupid like getting hurt at the athletics festival. I'm guessing Meat here is the only one who actually takes it seriously..."

"Uuuu~~! B-but, everyone got really excited whenever I went out! I know they did!!"

Rika gave a small nod, and added,

"It's true that the boys were really excited about it. Because your boobs were shaking all over the place."

"M-my b-...!?"

Sena's face went deep red.

"...Hmph. Further proof that you're just a lump of meat."

Yozora said while scoffing at Sena, seemingly irritated.

"I-it wasn't just the athletics festival either! I did all kinds of stuff at the cultural festival too!"

In response to Sena's desperate insistence on the greatness of her actions, Rika said,

"Your class did that one play, right? I'm pretty sure it was yours anyway, because the day after I remember thinking how there was a weirdly energetic blond girl in it."

"Yeah, that's it! Wasn't I so cool in it!?"

"I don't remember what it was about, but I do seem to recall you being very active in it. You were cutting down the villains with your sword left and right.

"Yeah, that was me! I was the main character after all!"

"...You were the only one who was all excited about it, and honestly, with how unmotivated the rest of the cast looked, it was painful to watch."

"What!?"

This is apparently the first time someone's told Sena that, because she looks positively shocked.

"B-but, I know the audience was excited!!"

"That's true. The boys in the audience all enjoyed watching your boobs jiggle as you jumped around the stage. You were in a skirt too, so they caught a few glimpses of your panties as well."

"Gyaaahhhh!!"

Sena crouched down and grabbed her head with both hands.

"Uuuu~~ T-they weren't excited because they were bewildered by my incredibly splendid performance...!?"

"...By the way, I feel iffy about saying this, but the play itself wasn't that good either. All I really felt from it was that you seemed to enjoy acting in it."

Rika said, delivering the final blow.

"Uuu~... I never even thought of it like that... I'm so embarrassed..."

"...Well, it's like, doing all that in such a pathetic way is just like you, you know...? You are truly peerless in your patheticness..."

A cold smile rose to Yozora's face as she stared down at Sena, who was now in tears.

"I'm not that pathetic!! ...Ah, s-so wait, am I the reason why when I said I wanted to do a play again this year, not even a single one of the girls raised their hand...!?"

I reaffirmed my belief that Sena really is the kind of girl that all the other girls absolutely loathe.

"...By the way, what's your class doing for the cultural festival anyway, Sena?"

"A display, 'The History of Tohya City'."

"Uwa, that sounds so boring..."

"I know, right!? But my idea for a play was the only other suggestion, and none of the girls wanted to do it! What the hell!? This is so stupid! We could've at least done something that isn't so boring!"

"Most likely, they went with a display because it would limit how much Sena-senpai could go around doing whatever she wanted."

"You mean they hate me that much!?"

Sena moaned in frustration after having Rika point it out for her .

"Ghh...! Fine, I'll stand out, even with our boring display, and show those stupid girls how amazing I am! Oh, I know! How about if I make a display using all the pictures I have of me ever since my birth, complete with my own wonderful explanations!? I mean, this town basically exists solely for me, so it makes sense to say the history of Tohya city is the same as my own personal history, right!?"

"No, it doesn't make sense at all."

Thwack.

Yozora hit Sena on the head with a fly swatter she'd procured without my noticing.

"Fgyah!"

"Give it up already. Everybody hates you, Meat. You're as out of place in the school festival as we are..."

"Uuuuu~~!"

Tears of frustration began to well up in Sena's eyes.

"Hmph. All we can do is quietly endure as the normals dance around like fools for three days."

Yozora then shifted her gaze from Sena to me.

"...S-so, you know, Kodaka, on the day of the festival, you and I should――"

"I know! We can just make something for the cultural festival as the Neighbors Club!"

Sena declared in a booming voice, cutting off Yozora, who was trying to mumble something to me.

"...Meeeeeeaaattt...!!"

"W-why are you glaring at me!?"

Yozora was glaring at Sena with a look that could kill for some reason.

Sena started to tremble in fear with tears in her eyes as she said,

"I-I mean, we allllways think of some club activity to do at times like this, don't we!? This can be practice on how to participate in a cultural festival for when we have friends in the future!"

"...That is pretty much our usual pattern, isn't it..." I added.

Normally, Yozora's the one who thinks of something, but strangely, it was Sena this time.

And I have heard that most things people do for the cultural festival aren't with their class or club, but rather with their friends.

"We might not make it in time for this year's festival, but... in order to make sure we don't mess up when we do something with our friends for next year's festival—— we might as well do some practice...!"

"Heheh, yeah, let's do it!"

A big smile rose to Sena's face.

"Rika has no problems with that."

"Aniki's will is my will."

Rika and Yukimura gave their OK as well.

"...Kodakaaa..."

Yozora was the only one who seemed to be about to burst into tears.

"What's the matter? This is exactly the kind of thing we always do, isn't it?"

Yozora shot a glare at first Sena, then me.

"It's nothing! Kodaka you iiiidiot!"

Yozora let out a small sigh after her insult that sounded like she was sulking.

"...Hmph... Fine... The Neighbors Club will participate in this year's cultural festival. Although it may simply be practice for when we're all normals, there will be no slacking. We'll use our power to send those normals enjoying the festival into the depths of hell!"

"Heheh, of course!" "OK~" "Understood."

Sena, Rika, and Yukimura all agreed with Yozora's declaration.

"...No, we really shouldn't be sending them to hell ya' know."

Sadly, my retort fell on deaf ears.

Thus, the Neighbors Club's next activity was decided.

Maid Cafe

Thus, we quickly began discussing what we should do for the cultural festival.

"How about a maid cafe!?"

"Die."

Yozora replied to Sena's idea immediately and harshly.

Since we can't do anything before deciding what it is we want to do, we decided to have everyone throw out their own ideas and then examine them.

And by examine, I don't mean just discussing the idea, but actually try doing a little test-run of it as well.

The reasoning being that we can kill two birds with one stone by doing so. On one hand, it helps us pick out an idea, and on the other, it serves as practice for when we do something with our friends next year.

And so, the first suggestion was a "maid cafe" from Sena, but...

"H-how can you say no so quickly!? Maid cafes are the bread and butter of every cultural festival ever! Even the galge I'm playing now, called 'Moshimo Koukou Yakyuubu no Manager ga Bara-iro no Gakuen Seikatsu wo Okureru nara', aka 'Moshibara',

has the protagonist's class doing a maid cafe! Incidentally, this game's game system is pretty novel in that the protagonist's best friend is sick, and her lifespan depends on——"[1]

"I don't care about your stupid galge. You can go die now."

Yozora said, interrupting Sena's protests(?).

It seemed like Sena was about to be deserted, but I jumped into the conversation.

"Well, I don't know if it's the 'bread and butter' of a cultural festival, but it's not that weird of an idea, is it? For Sena anyway..."

"What do you mean 'for me'!?"

"Don't sweat the small stuff."

"Muu. Acting like you're so great."

I decided to leave Sena to her complaining, and think things over.

I could definitely see a normal cafe, sans maids, being the 'bread and butter' of a cultural festival, and our club did have its own personal maid up until just recently.

Our room is definitely big enough for it too, and I bet we could borrow the chapel kitchen to handle the cooking.

I think it's actually a pretty good idea for our club.

"Rika doesn't think there's any real problem with a maid cafe either," said Rika.

"I am prepared to don my maid uniform again at any time," said Yukimura.

...Yukimura, do you actually *want* to wear it again?

Yozora then let out a short "Hah." as though mocking us.

"My goodness, what a bunch of thoughtless fools."

"...?"

"What? You think there's some kind of problem with it?"

Sena asked in a voice of displeasure, to which Yozora firmly declared in response,

"You think that *I* can handle serving any customers!?"

.....

.....

Silence fell upon the clubroom.

"..... Oh yeah."

Someone raised a voice of agreement.

"...I don't think it's something you should go parading around, but that is true, isn't it... There's no way Yozora could ever serve any customers~"

"To say nothing of being a maid. I can't imagine Yozora-senpai wearing a maid uniform and saying 'Welcome home, Master~' to any customers."

"That is true. A maid uniform would be most unfitting for Yozora-anego."

"Pffft, I just imagined Yozora in a maid uniform, and now I can't stop laughing~! There should be limits on how mismatched two things can be! This is just too much, pfft!"

We each made our own little comment, causing a vein to pop out on Yozora's head as her cheeks started twitching.

"You bunch of little... You're gonna piss me off if you keep insulting me like that..."

"D-don't look at me, you're the one that said it!"

"It's true that I can't hope to amicably serve any customers, but even I can handle the most basic tasks."

"I dunno about that~ The best I can see you doing is sitting in the back of some dingy bookshop with a grumpy look on your face while reading a book and watching over the shop."

"Ahh, that does sound pretty Yozora-like."

"I know, right? It's a simple job too, all you have to do when a customer brings a book up to the register is silently ring them up and give them their change."

"W-wha...!?"

Yozora's face was tinged with both anger and shock after hearing Sena's and my words.

"? Yozora?"

"Ah- I-it's nothing!"

Yozora said in response to my suspicions, as though trying to hide something.

"I-it's true that I can't serve customers! But! None of you are any better, damn it!"

You could almost hear Yozora's finger go "schwing!" as she pointed it at us.

"Uu...!"

I flinched by reflex, but,

"I-I can handle something as simple as serving customers! As long as it's at a normal cafe or restaurant with no maids and stuff!"

"Well then, Kodaka, have you ever served any customers at a cafe or restaurant?"

"I... haven't, but..."

I don't have any experience working any part-time job, let alone one where I'd serve customers.

I'd always been busy adjusting to wherever it is we had to move to, and I couldn't get a long-term thing going because I never knew when I'd have to move again, and there's always the chores to do, and ever since I took over handling the money at home in place of our dad who's never around, I haven't had the need to try and find a part-time job anyway, and also, umm....

"I-I might not have any experience, but I could do it if I wanted to! Probably... I... think..."

My voice slowly trailed off into nothingness.

"Aha, all the customers would run away if they had Kodaka serving them."

Sena uttered quite the rude statement.

"A-as if that'd happen! All I have to do is be a little sociable...!"

"Kodaka-senpai being sociable... pft-"

"Even I was able to comprehend the humor within that joke."

Rika and Yukimura both gave me their two cents.

"Kh... F-fine, then I'll do it right here! I'll show you I can serve customers!"

I then put on a sociable smile, and gave out a greeting in a friendly, gentle voice.

"W-welgum? ...C-cuhm on inn...?"

""""Holy crap!""""

Sena, Yozora, and Rika all made a look of surprise on their faces at the same time.

"That had an incredible level of intensity to it. As one would expect of Aniki."

Yukimura stared at me with sparkling eyes.

"Intensity!? Why would you describe it that way!?"

"It wouldn't have been strange if after that 'welcome' you said, ' to this insane world' or 'to 101 Hell Street' or something similar."

Rika said in response to my shock, as though she were teasing me.

"Gh... W-well what about you!? Can you serve customers?"

"Heheh, don't go underestimating the genius inventor, Rika Shiguma."

Rika seemed to be pretty confident in herself, but what does being a genius inventor have to do with serving customers?

"Ohh? Then give it a shot."

"Fine with me! Yozora-senpai, do we still have the maid uniform Yukimura was wearing?"

"Yeah."

Yozora opened the clubroom closet, and pulled out a maid uniform—— Wait, I just noticed this, but when did we get a closet in here too!?

We brought a TV and a cupboard in here, and always move the furniture around too. Man, we really are just using this lounge however the heck we want, aren't we...

Rika took the maid uniform from Yozora, and said,

"I figure I might as well take this chance to actually wear a maid uniform and try it out. I'll be changing now, so please close your eyes, Kodaka-senpai."

"Sure."

I closed my eyes, as told.

The sound of clothes rubbing against Rika's skin as she changed filled the clubroom for the next few minutes.

"...You can open your eyes now."

I obeyed Rika's strangely upset voice, and opened my eyes.

Rika was wearing a maid uniform.

"That's a face that says all you thought after seeing me was the plain fact that 'Rika was wearing a maid uniform,' and nothing more, isn't it..."

Rika said, seemingly disappointed about something.

"Ohh, that's amazing! How did you know what I was thinking? You got it exactly right, a perfect guess."

"Iiidiott iidiot, Kodaka-senpai's an iidiot!"

I was amazed by her skill and only gave her my honest praise, but for some reason Rika replied by insulting me with a few tears in the corners of her eyes.

She then said, as if she were pouting,

"And you actually kept your eyes closed the whole time... I can't believe this."

"Uh, you're the one who told me to close 'em, remember?"

"Yes, I did, but! You had a girl changing her clothes right in front of you! Isn't it normal to try and sneak a peek, even though you know it's wrong? Use your damn head!"

"Oh, not so fast. I might've actually been watching you with one eye part-open ya' know. Thanks for the show babe, gehihi."

Rika sighed and shook her head in response to my grin.

"Haa... I highly doubt it."

"W-why's that?"

"Because, as I was changing I did a crazy little dance, made ridiculous poses, and made weird faces too. There's no way you, Kodaka-senpai, with your need to retort at every silly thing someone does, would have been able to watch that without saying anything."

"W-what...!?"

I then noticed Yozora and Sena were flopped over on the table, shaking as though they couldn't take any more.

"Hey, what happened you guys!?"

"Hehehe, Rika was so funny they can barely even breathe as they try to hold back their laughter."

She actually made them both laugh? At the same time...!?

"Just what on Earth did you do!?"

"Heheh, I'm not telling someone who completely ignored Rika while she changed right in front of him~"

"Damn it, I couldn't care less about you changing clothes, but as a man who prides himself on his jokes, having missed something so funny is killing me...!"

"Couldn't care less... (´・ `)"

Rika pursed her lips, and said,

"Argh, forget it, I'm done with this god damn dimwit pudding! I'll be doing my job as a maid now, so Kodaka-senpai, please leave the room and re-enter for me."

"You sure seem fired up... And hey, what's with the god damn dimwit pudding remark... You've really been swearing a lot more lately, you know that...?"

I left the room while moaning and complaining, and quickly re-entered the room shortly after.

"I-it's not like I wanted you to come or anything, got it!? You goddamn retarded pudding!"

Thump!

"Oww!!"

Right after I entered the store (the clubroom), a maid (Rika) insulted and then kicked me in the shin!

"Y-you kicked me as hard as you could just now, didn't you!?"

"Whatever, just take a seat already, ok? You fucking bumpkin!"

Thump!

"Kuoh!? You kicked me *again*!?"

"So you can tell when you get kicked, but you don't understand what 'sit' means? Quite the untrained dimwit mutt we've got here! Do you even *have* a brain under that shit-colored hair that looks like what's left over after eating some keema curry!?"

Thump!

"Seriously, quit kicking me so hard, you idiot! Or at least stop kicking me in the shin! Don't think you can get away with whatever you want as long as you talk like some kind of tsundere! "

"Hahh? Tsundere? Don't get full of yourself, you damn green rice leafhopper! There's not even one microgram's worth of reason to act all nice to a stupid dung beetle! If you don't hurry up and do

as you're told, I'll tear off that cockroach-colored hair of yours, got that!?"

"Stop constantly attacking the part of my body I have a complex about!"

I put up some resistance, since she seemed to seriously be trying to hurt me.

Still, having my hair torn out is more than I can handle, so I walked over to the table.

Thump!

"Stop kicking me! I'm just about to sit down!"

"Who said you could sit in a chair made for humans, huh!? Damn pinworm head!"

"P-pinworm head!?"

That's just too much! I'm about to cry here! ...Although, it's not like I even know what a pinworm actually looks like.

"Where do you want me to sit then anyway!?"

"What, are you blind!? There's a chair only idiots can't see right there!"

"Uoh!?"

Rika kicked the back of my knees, and forced me into a pose as though I were sitting in an air chair.

"Don't move a muscle, got that!?"

I waited in my air chair for Rika to brew, and then bring me a cup of coffee.

...What the hell is this?

"I-it's not like I brought this here for you, got that!?"

Rika said, before starting to, all of a sudden, drink the coffee she brought over right in front of me.

"Ehhh!?"

She really didn't bring it for me!!

"Just so you know, the coffee costs 980 yen, got that!?"

"You seriously expect me to pay for a coffee you drank right in front of me that I didn't even order!? And it's ridiculously expensive too!"

"What, you want it that bad!? You want to put this hot, black stuff in your mouth that badly!? You look like a whore, you damn lewd sea urchin-flavored piece of shit!"

"Sea urchin!? What does that even mean!?"

"It means your head looks like someone poured soy sauce on some pudding."[2]

"Oh, now I get it!"

She's actually pretty clever... at least, the sea urchin thing was. Hehe...

"What's with that stupid grin on your face!? You probably thought 'She's actually pretty clever... at least, the sea urchin thing was,' but it wasn't clever at all, got that!? Hurry up n' finish your drink and get the hell outta here, you sea urchin bitch!"

I took the now half-empty cup of coffee from Rika.

I wanted to hurry up and leave anyway, so I quickly gulped it down.

However, my legs were shaking due to being stuck sitting in my air chair, making it hard to drink.

"Uwa, that's hot!"

I accidentally spilled some coffee on my pants.

"Can you not even eat your food correctly, you imbecile!? God damn it, I'm tired of trying to train this troglodyte whose head looks like the fur on a baboon's ass!"

Uuu... I can feel my heart breaking...

"Rika didn't brew that coffee for your dirty pants that smell like a mandrill's pubic hair! Move it! Suck up the coffee you spilled before you dry it!"

"As if I could!"

"Shut up, take your pants off, and then enjoy the nightmarish smell of your crotch mixed with coffee as you expose your pathetic crotch to the rest of the world, you pervert dung beetle!"

"...I-I'm begging you, please just stop...!"

I dumped the rest of the coffee down my throat in one gulp, and hung my head in shame.

Rika looked down as I did, and then quietly said with a defiant look on her face,

"Y-you can come again if you want to, got that..."

"Like hell I'll ever come again!!"

I screamed with all I had at the sadist maid who showed me a microgram of kindness at the very end.

"Heheh, so, how was it? Did you like Rika's tsundere maid?"

"What part of that was a tsundere!? You snapped my heart clean in two!"

"That's strange... Rika quite enjoyed it personally."

"...That was definitely just her using acting tsundere as an excuse to vent out her anger on him, wasn't it..."

Sena said while looking at Rika, as though she'd just witnessed something terrifying.

"Ms. Rika has many things to consider," said Yukimura, nodding in agreement for some reason.

"...I see. So you can serve customers that way too, huh..."

"No, not a chance in hell."

Sena said to Yozora, who was nodding her head in understanding.

"...But it might not be all that bad..."

"What part of that is not bad!?"

"!? T-the part where I'd get to kick you, obviously! D-don't get the wrong idea, ok!? It's not like I want to be verbally abused or anything, got that!?"

"Uh, I really doubt anyone would ever even think that..."

And kicking me is definitely not good.

"So, how would you rate Rika's tsundere maid?"

Rika did a small turn, and flipped her skirt up a little.

"About 20 points, I guess," said Sena, utterly uninterested.

"Negative 80. What kind of maid acts like that?" I said.

"About 40 points, I suppose. There is the one flaw in how you need to reassess what it means to "serve" a customer, but you were going in the right direction."

"That's a pretty damn fatal flaw if you ask me. She wasn't going in the right direction either."

I remarked to Yozora, who actually said that seriously.

"Muu, I thought I did better than that... I wonder if tsunderes just aren't suited for working in the service industry."

"You're still trying to pretend that was you being tsundere?"

I said, with half open eyes, to Rika, who was making a difficult face.

"What did you think about it, Yukimura?"

After being asked for her opinion, Yukimura put on her usual expressionless look and tilted her head to the side before responding by saying,

"With all due respect... it is my opinion you have much to learn."

"No wayyyy~"

Rika made a shocked faced after hearing Yukimura's blunt rejection.

"...I suppose it must be true if Yukimura says so... Am I correct in assuming wearing a maid uniform all this time has allowed you to grasp a part of what it truly means to be a maid?"

"Yes, you would be."

Yukimura nodded with a completely serious look on her face.

"...I never knew. I always thought of it as you basically just cosplaying as a maid."

Yozora quietly added. Wait, hold it right there, you're the one who made her do it!

"So, what *is* the true essence of a maid? Please teach me."

"Very well."

Yukimura closed her eyes, and gave a strangely solemn nod.

"...Hey, don't you think Yukimura's getting a little conceited here?"

Sena whispered to me, but even though I agree with her, I didn't say anything.

A now slightly conceited sounding Yukimura then declared, in a noticeably more serious voice than usual,

"The true essence of a maid is—— a heart devoted to Aniki."

.....

"Ooo~ Kayy~! Let's have Meat show us how she serves customers next~ (monotone)"

"Ehh!?" I'm doing it too!?"

"Come on, just do it~ You might as well~ I want to see Sena-senpai serving a customer~ (monotone)"

The three of them acted like Yukimura hadn't said a thing, and started chatting amongst themselves.

Yukimura made a face that looked like (´・ `).

Sena then said, while shooing me away with her hand,

"Fine, I guess I can do it. Hey, Kodaka! I'm changing, get out of here!"

"I can't just close my eyes like before?"

"What wuzzat?"

She started glaring at me.

"……You've got two previous offenses after all."

"Eh?"

"Nothing! Hurry up and get out!"

"A-alright."

Sena started to blush for some reason before shooing me away until I'd left the clubroom.

"You can come in now."

I heard Sena's voice come from inside the clubroom giving me the OK, so I opened the door.

"Welcome home, Master."

Sena, now wearing the entire maid uniform, gave me a light bow as I entered the room.

"Uohh..."

I accidentally let a voice of amazement leak out.

Just having Sena wear a maid uniform, speak to me politely, and call me Master was shocking enough, but that hint of refinement in her bow and her tender voice fit perfectly, almost as if she were a real maid.

"Mumumu."

Yukimura made a faint grumbling sound. I'm guessing it was from some kind of sense of rivalry, but she seemed upset.

"...Still, that thing looks... kinda small for you."

"Ugh...!"

Sena's face twitched ever so slightly.

This maid uniform was originally Yozora's, so Yukimura and Rika were able to wear it with relative ease due to them being about the same size as her, but it looked a little too tight for Sena.

Especially on the upper half of her body—— The collar looks stretched to the limit as it is, but even so, it's still kinda... especially around the chest, it um... it looks so stretched out it might burst open any second now.

"S-stop staring at me, idiot!"

Sena covered her chest with both hands, her cheeks red.

"Actually, how did you guys even wear this thing before? Wasn't it tight at all?"

"...Fuck."

Yukimura looked at her chest and Sena's in intervals before making a look of displeasure on her face.

"...Porn star," Rika murmured with an expressionless face.

"...God damn whore...!"

Yozora cursed at Sena with a hostile look in her eyes.

"Uuu... H-heheh, looks like the small fries are saying something!
"

Sena arrogantly puffed out her chest, slightly teary-eyed.

"I-in any case, I shall now escort you to your seat, Master."

Sena gave me a smile.

"S-sure thing..."

Damn, having Sena call me Master seriously gets my heart pounding!

Sena then guided me to my seat, where I sat down.

"...Quit ogling her, Kodaka you idiot."

Yozora said in an unhappy tone of voice.

"Have you decided on what to order?"

"Um... What's on the menu?"

"We have our special maid sandwich, special maid cake, special maid tea, special maid coffee, and other such items available to be ordered."

"Ohh? Ok, I'll try the cake then."

"My apologies, but we are currently out of cake."

"So you don't have it after all! Ok, then just a coffee..."

"Understood, Master."

Sena gave me another light bow before going off to brew some coffee, and then smoothly carrying it back.

"Here is your order, Master. One special maid coffee."

She's doing this so perfectly that it almost feels weird.

I looked back and forth between the coffee in front of me and Sena's face before saying,

"...Wait, um, seriously, what's going on here... How are you so good at this...!?"

"He's right! There's no way Sena-senpai could ever serve any customers right! You must be a fake, right!? Or some maid spirit that took over Sena-senpai's body!"

"Oh maid spirit, release yourself from Sena-anego's body."

Sena's face went red after hearing all of our little comments.

"W-what's so weird about me being good at this!? I'm umm, I-I'm just copying what Stella does!"

"Ah, now I get it."

"Oh, is that all. I guess having a pro butler by you so often means you'll pick some of it up by osmosis."

"Y-yeah! That's it!"

Sena fiercely nodded her head up and down as the rest of us came to an understanding.

She doesn't have to get all worked up about it though.

"...Why would watching a butler teach you how to serve in a cafe...?"

Yozora mumbled something with a look of doubt on her face, but I couldn't really hear her.

"Still, this is pretty good, even if you're just copying her."

"I-it's not that good, geez~"

Sena blushed with shyness after hearing my honest praise.

Now then, guess it's time to drink this coffee... but right as I reached out for my cup,

"Ah, hold on. This is the special maid coffee, so we have to cast the spell to make it taste super good."

"Spell?"

Sena returned a confident smile to my doubtful look, and then started the spell.

"Suuuuper~ taaaasty~ spellll♪ Moe moe kyun kyun♥"

She made a heart with her two hands and did a little dance as she cast some mysterious spell.

“Suuuuper~ taaaasty~ spell!! ♪

Moe moe kyun kyun ♥”

隣人部 メイド喫茶へようこそ

.....

.....

.....A heavy silence fell upon the clubroom.

.....Apparently that mysterious spell was one that freezes space-time.

"... H... Huh...?"

Sena's face stiffened in the shape of a strained smile.

"Meat..."

Yozora stared at Sena with a gaze as cold as absolute zero.

".....Y-yes, what is it, Master..."

".....Meat."

"Hauu!"

Yozora simply kept staring at Sena in silence.

A cold sweat ran down Sena's face as she stood there with her maid smile stuck on her face while Yozora stared at her with her pitch black eyes that looked as though they could see through everything.

"...Uu... Ah... Auu..."

And then, at long last, that painful smile of hers crumbled——

"I definitely didn't go to a maid cafe on one of our days off or anything, okayyyyyy!?"

Sena ran out of the room in tears while screaming what was obviously the truth.

...While wearing the maid uniform.

.....

"Ok, so no maid cafe then!"

Yozora said with a ridiculously refreshed looking face, to which Rika, Yukimura, and I all nodded deeply in agreement with.

Later that day.

About 30 minutes later, Sena came back to the clubroom with an awkward look on her face after realizing there was no way she could go home wearing the maid uniform, and none of us said a word.

I quietly left the clubroom, and wordlessly sent Sena off, who had now changed back into her school uniform, before re-entering the clubroom.

I then killed some time reading a book before we all started to disperse around our usual time.

As I was walking through the chapel, I suddenly stopped in my tracks.

There's one thing that's still really bugging me.

It's the little act Rika did when she was changing. I just have to know what kind of weird stuff Rika did that was so funny it had Yozora and Sena gasping for breath on the table...!

When I left the clubroom, Yozora told me, "I'll go home once I get to a good place to stop," so she should still be in there.

I did a 180 degree turn and headed for the clubroom to ask Yozora about Rika's act.

Ca-lick.

I opened the door to the clubroom.

Yozora was wearing the maid uniform.

Our eyes met.

"....."

"....."

We stared at each other in total silence...

Then, all of a sudden, Yozora's face went deep red like a newly lit match.

"T-this is, umm, auu, awa...!"

Yozora's mouth was opening and closing like a fish out of water .

I showed her a kind smile while taking a step back, and closing the door to the clubroom.

Later that night, I got a huge text message from Yozora.

Basically, it said, "I only wore the maid uniform because Sena did, and had to check to make sure she didn't rip anything or stretch any of it out too far." (about 80% of it was her insulting Sena).

In return, all I did was send her a small reply that read, "I know. "

Translation Notes:

1. ↑ The title in English is roughly "What if a High School Baseball Team Manager Lead a Rose-Colored School Life".
2. ↑ You usually put soy sauce on sea urchin when eating it.

Fortune Telling

One morning, after eating breakfast as usual, I noticed there was a fortune telling show on the TV that just happened to have been left on.

According to the fortunes by blood type, my luck today was as low as could be.

"Oh ho! Anyone with type AB blood will have really bad luck today! Please pay careful attention to your actions, so you don't hurt any of your friends!"

"....."

...Ahh... Ahh, what a relief~ Good thing I don't have any friends !

I'm so lucky I don't have to worry about hurting my nonexistent friends!

".....Tch."

Not that I believe in fortune telling, but hearing it put me in a bad mood, so I changed the channel.

The channel I changed to was doing some fortune telling stuff, too, but this one used astrology.

It said that my constellation was the second luckiest today, but it went on to say,

"You might even get a lot closer to your friends today!"

I just said I don't have any friends...

While making that little retort in my head, something came to mind.

Fortune telling... is it?

"How about a fortune telling booth?"

It was later that day, in the Neighbors Club clubroom after school.

We'd started talking about what to do for the cultural festival again, and I suggested my idea from this morning.

Yozora, Sena, Rika, Yukimura, and I were all gathered in the clubroom.

Our two younger members, Kobato and Maria, were not present, but apparently Kobato's supplementary lessons end today , so she should start coming again tomorrow.

"What, do you believe in that stuff?"

Sena said, as though mocking me.

"No, not really, but aren't there a lot of people who do? Especially high school girls."

"Heheh, as if someone with no friends like me would know whether or not there are lots of normal high school girls who like fortune telling!"

"Don't say something so sad so proudly..."

"Yeah... Now I'm feeling kinda sad too... Anyway, at the very least, I don't buy any of it. I mean, I'm an existence chosen by god! It doesn't matter what those stupid fortune tellers say, my luck is always as good as can be."

Sena said in a voice full of confidence, as though she truly believed that from the bottom of her heart.

"Yeah, that's right. That's exactly right, Meat. Your luck has been as good as can be ever since you were born, and it'll probably be that way the rest of your life."

Yozora affirmed Sena's nonsensical delusions for some reason.

"Yozora...?"

"I know, right!? So you *can* say some good stuff every now and then!"

Yozora gave a slow, vigorous nod to Sena, who was now in a great mood, and then said,

"Indeed. Your luck is as good as can be... in other words, it's peaked. It can't go any higher than it is right now."

"Yep yep, that's righ——... Eh!?"

"Unable to make friends, hated and ignored by your classmates, always alone during gym class, always having other girls say " Kashiwazaki can just go with some guys, gyahaha!" when it's time to group up in Home Ec. class and on field trips... That's how you live right now, and it is the greatest amount of happiness that you will be allowed to have in your life. You will likely spend the rest of your life just as you have up until now..."

"Wai- S-stop it... That's, not... true..."

Sena took a heavy blow from Yozora's psychological attack.

"Sena-senpai, always strive to do your best in life, ok...?"

"Sena-anego... I'm sorry."

"Hey! I don't need you guys pitying me, too!"

Sena started to get teary-eyed after having even her two juniors look at her with eyes full of pity.

"Hehe... relax, Meat."

Yozora made a kind smile, as though she were the bodhisattva ——not that she's ever said anything good after making that face—— and then tapped Sena on the shoulder.

"Yo... zora?"

"Meat... You've already got friends, don't you?"

"Y-Yozora...? Do you mean..."

Sena looked back up at Yozora with misty eyes.

Yozora made a gentle nod in return.

Ohh!? Is this actually going to have a happy ending...!?

Yozora deepened her smile even further, and said,

"You already have friends—— in your games!"

Hey.

"Ah, that's right! I'm always as happy as can be when I'm surrounded by all those wonderful girls in-game! Who cares about reality!? I can just be happy in my games——

Wait, no I can't!!"

"Ah, so you *do* realize you shouldn't obsess over your games."

I said, honestly surprised, in response to Sena's wonderfully executed retort.

I totally thought she'd lost the ability to differentiate between games and reality.

"Tch... I wish you'd just spent the rest of your life playing your stupid games."

Yozora said, as though spitting the words out.

"Anyway! I don't believe in fortune telling, ok!? You make your own luck!"

"Talking about games still, right?"

"I'm not only talking about games! It's the same in reality!"

Sena argued back, tears still in the corners of her eyes.

"...Still, a fortune telling booth might not be a bad idea."

Yozora coolly stated, completely ignoring Sena.

"Do you believe in fortune telling, Yozora?"

"Of course not."

Yozora spat out her rejection, and then added,

"Back in middle school, for three months I spent every day checking the TV, newspapers, magazines, etc. for every single horoscope, blood-type fortune telling, and zodiac fortune telling article I could find, all the while recording what happened to me on each day in great detail. Afterwards, I looked at the records I'd

made, objectively determined to what extent the predictions of each fortune telling were correct, and then compared the accuracy of all the fortunes I'd gathered. The result was that after three months, only four of them were accurate more than 50% of the time. However, those four were all month-long fortunes from monthly magazines, so when you take the length of their predictions into consideration, their high rates of accuracy could easily be written off as a coincidence. Hence, I do not believe in fortune telling."

"How much free time did you have..."

"Wow. You know, hearing you went that far actually makes me think the opposite, that you really like fortune telling."

Rika and I both gave our shocked reactions.

"So wait, you did all that, and say you don't believe in it at all, but you still think a fortune telling booth is a good idea?"

Yozora gave a firm nod in response to my suspicions.

Then, after lifting the corners of her mouth into a mischievous smile, she said,

"Heh... We get to say whatever the heck we want, passing it off as fortune telling, and then take the money of those imbecile normals who actually take it seriously... I doubt anything else could be as pleasurable as that... Heheh..."

"T-that's awful..."

"You are seriously an evil witch..."

"Yozora-anego, you are hardcore."

We were all stunned by Yozora's reasoning.

"Hmph, it's not like we'd be doing anything wrong. I get to make money off of fooling some stupid normals, and the normals get to enjoy listening to some useless nonsense only good for damaging your ears. It's a win-win situation."

"Well, yeah, most fortune telling might actually be similar to that, but still..."

...Although, it is true that Yozora is very witch-like—— In other words, there's no doubt that being a fortune teller would suit her.

Having Yozora wear a black robe while making some predictions in front of a crystal ball in a dark room certainly would have an authentic feel to it.

A fortune telling booth might actually be pretty popular...

"But Yozora-senpai, wouldn't you need the right set of skills to make that useless nonsense sound real?"

"Relax. I'm good at lying and acting."

That doesn't say much about her as a person, but she does sound like she could do the job.

"Meat. Let's do a test run where I tell your fortune."

"My fortune?"

Sena adjusted herself in her seat to face Yozora.

"Close the curtains and turn off the lights."

Rika and Yukimura followed Yozora's orders, shrouding the room in darkness.

Yozora put her cell phone in front of her, and turned the backlight on.

Yozora and Sena's faces were the only things hazily floating in the darkness.

Wow, this has a good feel to it...

".....Hmm..."

Yozora lowered her face considerably, and then groaned in a deep voice as she looked up at Sena.

"T-this is kinda embarrassing..."

Yozora groaned "Hrmmm" and "Hmmm" every now and then with a difficult look on her face as she stared at Sena, who was now blushing.

She then said, in a solemn tone of voice,

"Hrmmm... I can, see it..."

"Y-you can see it? See what...!?"

"Young one... might there be something worrying you...?"

Young one? Seriously?

"Eh, something worrying me...? Not really."

"...It, seems to be connected to your relationships with others."

"Eh!? My relationships...!? ...N-now that you mention it..."

A look of utter shock rose to Sena's face.

"...Hmm... I knew it... I can see a faint, purple fog emanating from your body... This symbolizes 'worry'... And the fact that it is coming out as a fog means there is a high chance it has to do with ' people'..."

"Ehh!? Wow! You're right! C-can you really see it!?"

Sena seemed to honestly be impressed by Yozora saying some random stuff in a believable tone of voice.

"I can see all... Young one... You... You often have a positive outlook on things, but occasionally you regret your actions..."

"Y-you know that!?"

"Sena-senpai..."

Rika looked like she couldn't believe Sena was actually buying this.

"...Furthermore, you possess many things that surpass what others hold... However, I can see you have often experienced frustrating times where you are unable to utilize your talents... You wish to become more assertive in interacting with others, yet your prudence stops you from doing so... You typically hold an optimistic view, but occasionally become confused as to what you should do... In addition, you are generally outgoing, but also have a side of you that easily succumbs to loneliness..."

"Y-you're right! How!? How do you know all that!?"

I could hear Rika let out a sigh next to me as she looked over at Sena, whose eyes were sparkling.

"...What is this called again?"

"...It's the Barnum Effect."

Rika quietly answered the question I'd just mumbled.

"Ah yeah, that's it."

If I remember right, it's the psychological phenomenon that occurs when you start thinking that general statements that could apply to anyone are actually being made specifically about yourself.

Yozora continued her believable dialogue in her solemn tone of voice.

Her way of speaking was seriousness incarnate, but her face was lowered considerably, and she wasn't looking at Sena at all. In fact, if you took a good look, you could see that she was shaking slightly.

"...Hey, that shaking is her trying not to laugh, isn't it?"

"...Looks like it," said Rika.

Sena continued enthusiastically listening to Yozora, completely unaware of that fact.

"Y-Yozora, I had no idea you knew that much about me... I... I might actually be a little happy..."

Sena seemed to be seriously impressed as her eyes moistened.

"...Is this woman retarded... Ahem... Ahh, umm... you are both kind, and yet unable to express it, hence... I would not mind teaching you a magic spell to improve your fortunes..."

"Y-you have a spell like that!?"

"Indeed... It is one of my most closely guarded spells, but I shall make an exception and teach it to you..."

"Teach me, teach me!"

"...This evening... At exactly midnight... go on your roof, and place a plate filled with water on your head. Then, spin around three times while screeching in a ear-piercing voice, and end by yelling 'sexy beam!' so loud that it echoes throughout your entire home... If you can do that without spilling any water, the Moon will grant you its blessings, and great fortune shall be bestowed upon you..."

"Bft-"

Rika let out a stifled laugh.

"Okay! Thanks, Yozora! I had the wrong idea about you...!"

Sena, who now had complete and utter faith in Yozora, totally bought Yozora's ridiculous nonsense that held not a single shred of credibility.

"U-... Ubft-... I will be praying for your bpft-... g-good fortune..."

Yozora gave a deep nod while trembling as she desperately tried to hold back her laughter.

That night.

Around one in the morning, I got a text from Sena.

Title: (ノ`) *Sniffle*...

Body: Papa got really super mad at me... but I'll be happier now, so it's OK! \(^)/

".....Seriously?"

I gave a light retort, my eyes just barely half-open.

You're kidding me, she actually did it?

She actually put a plate on her head while screeching on her roof, and then yelled "sexy beam"?

Times like these make me seriously worry about Sena's future...

If she doesn't find a reliable guy to marry, she just might get tricked by some shady guy and end up being the last generation of the Kashiwazaki family...

Anyway, I wrote **"Look up the Barnum Effect."** in response, and turned off my phone.

The First Time

"

YOOHHHHZUOOHHHH

–

AAAGGHHGAAHHHHI

!!!!!!"

The next day after school, as Yozora and I were walking to the clubroom, we heard a terrifying voice that resembled the wailing of the dead in Hell.

We both knew whose voice it was, so all it did was take us by surprise a bit, but every other student around us made a startled look on their face as they tried to find the source of the yell they just heard.

"

GUOHGAEHGVOHZDFS

-

$UVOAHH#AUGDH¥ *

+!!!!!!"

The person sprinting towards us at full speed while letting out a crazed howl that sounded more like a starving demon than a human, was none other than Sena.

It was an incredible sight; you could've easily mistaken her for an Ogre or a Hannya.

It was a face that no pretty young girl should ever make.

"Tch..."

I stopped and turned around, waiting for Sena to get to us, causing Yozora to click her tongue and do the same.

"Haa... Haa... Ghahh, Ghahh..... Y-Yozoruahh...!!"

"What, Meat?"

Sena caught up, and was breathing wildly with steam practically rising from her body.

Yozora offered her usual cold gaze in return.

"Don't try and play du- grakhagh! .....Huuuuu, Hahhhh. Huuuuu, Hahhhh..."

Sena took a few deep breaths after choking on her words, and at last seemed to have regained control of her breathing.

"Don't try and play dumb, stupid fox woman!! H-how dare you trick me!!"

"Trick you? What do you mean?"

Yozora gave a cool response without batting an eye.

"Your fortune telling yesterday! You just made some random crap up... and I, I... Uuuuuu~~!"

I then said to Sena, who had begun to groan with tears in her eyes,

"...Well, don't worry about it too much, Sena... The chairman probably gets mad at you for doing stupid stuff all the time, right?"

"Well, yeah, b—— Wait, no he doesn't!! Kodaka, just what do you think my life at home is like!?"

Sena said, as though she never expected me to say that.

"——Wait, that doesn't even matter! I mean, yeah, getting scolded by Papa sucks, but...! ...I... was actually... Uuuu~~! ...a little bit... happy..."

"Hm?"

Yozora tilted her head at Sena, who mumbled something in a tiny voice.

Sena's face became dyed red with anger.

"I-it's nothing! Yozora you iiiidiot!! Geez! I'm, I'm seriously... seriously... Uuuu~!! Idiot idiot idiot!"

Sena glared at Yozora half—— no, 80% in tears.

"Idiot... you're such an idiot..."

Her tears were different than the ones from all the times she ran out of the clubroom after Yozora talked her down.

They were serious tears, made from a mix of both anger and sadness.

Looks like... Sena's really pissed off this time.

"...H... Hmph..."

I'm guessing Yozora noticed that as well, because she started fiddling with her bangs.

".....Muu..."

".....Hmph..."

On one hand was Sena, glaring at Yozora, and on the other, Yozora, averting her eyes as though running away.

There was a seriously awkward atmosphere flowing between them right now.

And as those two stood there, the other students walking by kept taking curious glances at them out of the corners of their eyes, whispering between themselves.

"...H-hey, why don't we go to the clubroom for now, ok?"

I said, trying to smooth things over somehow, to which both Sena and Yozora replied by giving a small nod with irritated looks on their faces.

Ca-lick... I opened the door and entered the clubroom, where I was greeted by——

"Ah! An-cha——... Kukuku... I've been waiting for you... my other half..."

Kobato, who'd been lazing on the couch with her arms stretched out, swinging her legs around, hurriedly got up off the sofa when she realized someone had opened the door, and then slightly puffed out her chest in pride before greeting us in Leysis mode.

Kobato was the only one in the clubroom. Looks like Rika and Yukimura still aren't here yet.

"Kobato-chan is heeeeeeerree (˚)!!"

Sena let out a shout of joy, or rather, a weird screech, upon detecting Kobato's presence.

"Ugh."

Kobato frowned, clearly unhappy to see her.

Sena's eyes were both filled with an infinite amount of 's, and she wore a huge smile on her face that made her depressed attitude from before seem like a lie.

"Kobato-chan it's been so loonngggggg! Hey~ hey~ why are you here!? Huh!? Why why why!? Why is Kobato-chan here today!?

Uhyooohhhhhhhh! Ko-ba-to-chan, you, are, my, an-gel! Kobato-chan's angel powers are the best in the worlddddd!!"

"Uuu~... An-chan..."

Kobato looked like she was about to cry in response to Sena, who looked like she was about to explode with happiness in a way that kind of reminded me of Maria.

"Haa Haa... I can't believe I get to meet Kobato-chan, it must be my lucky day...!"

Seems like Sena was really dying to see Kobato again...

Now that I think about it, it's been about two weeks now, hasn't it?

I see her every day at home, so obviously I wouldn't say "it's been so long", but due to the supplementary lessons she had to take because of her bad grades on her finals, Kobato hadn't been able to come to the clubroom for a while.

"...This single-celled piece of meat is as disgusting as ever..."

Yozora murmured while standing next to me, and then——

"".....Phew..."

It was only a tiny one, but... Yozora let out a sigh of relief.

"Yozora...?"

"? What is it, Kodaka?"

Yozora gave me a puzzled look. Guess she didn't even realize it herself.

"...No, it's nothing."

Yozora thinned her eyes in confusion at my response, but soon after she moved her gaze over to Sena, who had her hands held out in front of her, opening and closing them as though she'd transformed into some kind of beast who was about to pounce on Kobato.

"...Looks like she was blessed with happiness after all."

Yozora casually said.

Sena gasped and quickly turned around.

There was a tinge of shock on that face of hers.

"Y-you're right... I really was blessed...! I was blessed with Kobato-chan...!"

"Blessed...? Uh, no, it's not that big of a deal. All she did was finish her supplementary classes, and hence, she can come to the clubroom again now." Sena gasped again in response to my retort.

"Y-yeah, that's right! I-it's not like Yozora's fake magic did any of this! I-I know that!"

"...Heheheh... Ohh, I dunno... are you sure about that...?"

Yozora said with a mysterious smile on her face in the same fortune teller voice she used yesterday.

Sena blushed a little bit before saying,

"You're seriously a total jerk...!"

She then quickly turned her back to Yozora, and added,

"...I-I don't believe in your stupid fortune telling one little bit, but... W-well, I'll let you off the hook because Kobato's here now!"

"...Who do you think you are... Don't get carried away, rotten Meat..."

Yozora made a displeased frown on her face before averting her eyes from Sena again, and letting out a small "...Hmph."

I was the only one who noticed the hint of red on Yozora's cheeks.

"Fueh...?"

I walked over to Kobato, who had her head tilted in confusion, and told her,

"Welcome back, Kobato."

I lightly placed my hand on Kobato's head, and she replied by giving me a tiny nod, followed by a bright smile.

Birthday

Yukimura and Rika walked into the clubroom a few minutes after we'd arrived.

We then began our club activities as a group of six for the first time in quite a while.

"So, are we all agreed on doing a fortune telling booth for the cultural festival?"

Rika was the one to begin the conversation.

Yozora, Sena, and I all exchanged a few glances with each other.

"...I think we should give it a little bit more thought."

"...I'd like to put it on hold for now."

Yozora and I both gave our opinions on the matter.

"I think doing something else would be better too, so that we can avoid making any more victims..."

Sena said after us, with a demure look on her face.

"...Sena-senpai, you didn't really take that fortune telling from yesterday seriou——"

"O-of course not!! I didn't scream on top of the roof or anything like that, ok!?"

Sena quickly shook her head back and forth, prompting Rika to sigh while making an astounded look on her face, before saying,

"...Well, honestly, Rika was thinking about doing something else too, since it might be a bit much to make Yozora-senpai do all the work. I did bring a few fortune telling books with me anyway though."

"Fortune telling books?" Yozora asked.

"Yes. Rika figured if we were going to do a fortune telling booth , then we should all know a bit more about it."

Rika took a good number of books out of her bag, and placed them on the table.

There were thick books with big fancy covers, "Start Fortune Telling Today" type books, old "Animal Fortune Telling" and " Vegetable Fortune Telling" books that used to be popular, random fad books like "Kasuka Futokusa's Hell Astrology", and a few other kinds as well.

"Did you go out and buy all these?"

Rika shook her head at my question.

"I just grabbed them from the back of my bookshelves."

"So these are all yours then, huh..."

I never expected a famous inventor like Rika to have these kinds of books.

Rika blushed a little after noticing I was looking at her, and said ,

"I-I was just a little bit interested in them a while ago, that's all! I told you before, didn't I? All girls love supernatural stuff like this."

Rika getting all embarrassed like that was, well, actually, pretty cute.

I then noticed Yukimura staring at the books laying on the table.

"Yukimura?"

"...Aniki."

Yukimura was energetically pulling on the sleeve of my shirt.

"Hm?"

"Aniki... What say you to trying our hand at Sengoku Era Generals Fortune Telling?"

She meekly pointed over at a thin paperback book with a title that read "Sengoku Era Generals".

On the cover were various Sengoku Era generals drawn in a deformed cutesy style.

Based on the way the spine looks, I'm guessing it's from the same series as "Animal Fortune Telling" and "Vegetable Fortune Telling".

"What say I...? Wait, do you want to try it, Yukimura?"

Yukimura blushed as though embarrassed and gave a small nod while staring at me with her typical spaced-out look.

"So you like this stuff too, huh~"

I made a bit of a wry smile.

Sengoku Era Generals Fortune Telling is it...

I could tell it was a simplistic book that tells you what Sengoku Era general you are based on your birth date, blood type, etc. without even opening it up to see.

"Alright, then let's give this "Sengoku Era Generals Fortune Telling" a try then."

Sena yanked the book out of the pile, and flipped through the pages.

"Hmm~ Looks like it tells you what Sengoku Era general you are based on your blood type and birth date."

I let out a small wry laugh after hearing it was exactly like I thought it'd be.

"Ummm, OK, let's start with Kodaka. When's your birthday, and what's your blood type?"

"Mine? My birthday is July 30th, and my blood type is AB."

I answered, to which she replied,

"July 30th... so it was over summer break."

"Yeah. Thanks to that, I've never had a birthday party with my friends before..."

"How nice to be able to say it's because of summer break that you've never been able to have a birthday party with your friends."

Yozora coolly said, as though stabbing me right in the heart.

I really wish she'd stop throwing those knife-like words of hers like it's nothing...

But yes, fine, it's just an excuse. I know that if someone had friends who knew about their birthday, then they'd throw a party for them, summer or not.

I have no friends, and hence, didn't do anything particularly special for my 17th birthday earlier this year.

Hell, I pretty much completely forgot about it...

"To think I was unable to celebrate Aniki's date of birth... I've made the biggest mistake of my life..."

Yukimura said, a meek expression on her face.

"Ah, by the way, my birthday is May 19th!"

"Ohh? That's right around when I came to this school."

"Who cares about Meat's birthday? Hurry up and finish your fortune telling."

Yozora casually said with a hint of displeasure.

"Muu... Umm, type AB, born on July 30th, right? .....You're Nobunaga Oda."

"Oh?" "Hmph..." "Uh-huh." "I would expect no less of Aniki." "....

Aside from Yukimura's slightly excited voice, the rest of the club members didn't sound too interested, and none of them made any reactions worthy of note.

But yeah, honestly, being told that I'm Nobunaga Oda just makes me want to ask, "And? So what?" in return...

I mean, I'm not actually Nobunaga in the first place...

"Anego. Which general am I?"

Yukimura asked, a bit fired up for some reason.

"Yukimura? When were you born, and what's your blood type?"

"June 13th, type O."

"June 13th, type O... You're one year younger than me, so... Ah, this one? ...Umm, it says you're Kanetsugu Naoe."

".....Is that so."

Yukimura pursed her lips and lowered her gaze after hearing the answer.

She was obviously pretty upset about it.

"...Do you not like Kanetsugu Naoe? I don't know much about it , but he's a pretty famous general, isn't he? He's even the main character of Taiga Drama."

"Kanetsugu produced no results, hence, I am not fond of him."

...That was a surprisingly severe appraisal.

"I see, so you don't like guys who don't produce results, huh..."

"That is not all, Aniki."

Yukimura calmly continued by saying,

"Kanetsugu Naoe was the Uesugi household's chief retainer, and thus, while he should have put his master, Kagekatsu Uesugi and the Uesugi household above all, he recklessly challenged Ieyasu Tokugawa and caused a war, exposing his master and household to great peril. As a fellow warrior, I simply cannot accept the foolhardy actions he took. Of course, I am not rebuking his challenging of the mighty Tokugawa itself, and, while the results may have differed, I have nothing but great praise for Kanetsugu's co-conspirator, Mitsunari Ishida's loyalty to the Toyotomi househo——"

"OK, stop! Calm down, Yukimura!"

I quickly moved to stop Yukimura, who'd begun one of her history rants.

"OK, uh, next up is Yozora!"

"I'm fine. That crap is a waste of time."

Yozora flatly refused in her default sullen mood.

"Why do you have to be such a buzzkill... it wouldn't hurt to try . It's just for fun anyway."

"Don't care."

"Muu..."

Sena pursed her lips at Yozora's curt refusal, but didn't bother pressing the issue any further.

She probably realized it'd be stupid to get into a fight over something that was supposed to be "just for fun".

"Ummm... Alright, then let's do Kobato-chan next instead! Kobato-chan, tell me your birthday and blood type, OK? Hehehe... "

Kobato made a look of disgust on her face, but reluctantly answered all the same.

"...Kukuku... I was born in the year 2468 under the Devil King's calendar... It was the day of the solar eclipse during the month of

the black dragon—— Just as was written in the legends of yore, on that day, I descended into the realm of m——"

"Kobato was born on October 18th, and her blood type is AB."

"An-chan!!"

Kobato puffed out her cheeks and pouted after I went and spit out her actual birthday and blood type.

"October 18th and type AB... Oh, and what year were you born? Under the western calendar."

"Ahh, under the western calendar it should be——"

"——Wait, October 18th!?"

Sena interrupted me as I went to answer her question with a huge shout.

Bam! She slammed the book shut and charged over to me.

"October 18th... that's next week, isn't it," said Yozora.

"October 18th!? That's next week!"

Sena repeated it again for some reason unknown to me.

"...What's there to get all excited about?"

"Are you kidding me!? This is Kobato-chan's birthday!! Why didn't you say anything about it!?"

"...Uh, is there some reason I needed to tell you about it?"

Kobato strongly nodded her head up and down in agreement with my questioning.

"B-because! It's the holy day Kobato-chan was born on!!"

Holy day? Seriously?

"I don't think you need to make such a big deal out of a birthday... All you normally do is have a dinner that's a bit fancier than usual, eat cake, and get some presents, right?"

"...Kukuku... My other half... I trust you have not forgotten this year's tribute to me, correct...?"

"Yeah, I reserved it for you."

"Ehe~"

Kobato happily blushed at my response.

By the way, her birthday present this year is a new game that just happened to go on sale right before her birthday.

"Uuuu~~! But I'm her big sister! I want to celebrate Kobato-chan's birthday tooooo~~!"

"No, you're definitely *not* her big sister!"

Seeing as how I'm Kobato's brother, I denied Sena's delusions with all I had.

Right after I did,

"...Now that I think about it, people who are good friends *do* hold birthday parties for each other," Rika said.

"Yeah... that's what I've heard too. Although, my birthday is over summer break, so I've never had a chance to have one with my friends before..."

"Kodaka..."

"I'm sorry."

I let my head hang in shame after receiving Yozora's look of pity.

Yozora went "Hmph..." and let out a deep sigh while looking at me out of the corner of her eye.

"...A birthday party, huh..... I do suppose that's something the Neighbors Club should practice, don't you think? ...For when we... all become normals in the future..."

"Yes yes! I'm in! I think we should have a birthday party for Kobato-chan!"

Sena energetically threw up her hand and voiced her approval.

"...Well, I guess we may as well do it if we've got the opportunity to. ...Rika's never been to a real birthday party either."

Rika agreed with Yozora's suggestion too.

"Celebrating Aniki's younger sister's birthday is only natural for one such as I serving as his underling. I shall put forth my best efforts to celebrate her birthday, in order to make up for missing the chance to celebrate Aniki's..."

"Uh, you don't have to make up for mine you know."

I said in retort to Yukimura's overly serious declaration, and then continued by saying...

"...OK, then let's do it... We'll hold a birthday party for Kobato."

I let a bitter smile rise to my face after finishing my sentence.

As for Kobato, she was going "Au? Hau?" as she looked around the room in confusion.

Anyway... That's how we ended up deciding to have our first birthday party with people other than our family.

Texts

It was the night of the day we'd decided to hold a birthday party for Kobato.

After eating dinner with Kobato and returning to my room, I got a text from Sena.

Title: Kobato-chan's Holy Birthday!

Message: We're going to buy Kobato-chan's birthday present together this Sunday. Kobato-chan *lick lick* (*^*)

I thought it was very Sena-like to say "we're going" instead of " let's go".

Still, this is really out of the blue. I mean, what if I had plans—— I don't of course, but...

Anyway, I sent her a text that read "Fine, I'll go, just stop with the licking."

After my reply, she asked me when and where we should go shopping, but I have no idea where any good places would be in this town, so I told her I'd let her decide.

Five minutes later, I got a mail that said we should go to Nagaya city, which is the biggest city in a neighboring prefecture.

It takes about 20 minutes to get from Tohya station to Nagaya, but Nagaya is way bigger of a city than Tohya is, and in fact, you could say it's the backbone of all the surrounding prefectures, including ours.

There's even a big shopping district around Nagaya station that has an especially large number of department stores and restaurants, with tons of people constantly coming and going... or so I've heard.

My memories of going there with Mom and Dad back when I used to live here a long time ago are fuzzy at best.

Honestly, I think we could find a decent present in the shopping district around Tohya station, but I figured what the heck, might as well take the chance to go check out Nagaya.

Thus, I sent Sena a text giving her the OK.

Sena sent me back an overly-excited text that read something like "I'm getting Kobato-chan a super wonderful present!! (≥≤) You better not be late \(^^)/".

We then decided to meet up in the Tohya station waiting room at one in the afternoon before ending our conversation.

It was now the following day, Saturday morning.

I went to check my phone, and saw that Rika had sent me a text.

I noticed the timestamp said that I got the text at three in the morning. Guess I fell asleep and didn't notice it.

Title: Ahnn

Message: Let's soar quietly high above the sky. Go and feel the

"....."

What the hell kind of nonsense is she sending me in the middle of the night...

I gave her a quick reply of "Shut up." and closed my phone.

After eating breakfast and returning to my room, I saw that I had yet another text from Rika.

Title: Re: Re: Ahnn

Message: Vertically Senpai! Read it vertically!

.....The timestamp on this one was within seconds of the reply I sent her.

I guess she must've sent it right after I sent mine.

It was an unusually brief message for Rika too; she probably sent it in a hurry.

"...Read it vertically...?"

I tilted my head, and read the oddly formatted message again, this time only reading the first letter of each line.

Let's soar quietly high above the sky. **G**o and feel the Eros of the

——LGOAdT——

"....."

I sent her a reply that read "Your formatting got messed up."

About 30 seconds later, I got another reply from her.

Title: Re: Re: Re: Re: Ahnn

No it didn't! At least put a milligram's worth of effort into deciphering it!

While telling myself it would be a waste to use even a milligram of my brain on a text from Rika, I gave deciphering her message another shot.

As I was doing so, I got another text 10 seconds later that said, " Um... It's not really all messed up, right?" so I sent her a reply saying "I'm trying again."

This time I took the entire word at the start of each line, instead of only the first letter.

——Let's go on a date tomorrow——

"Hmm..."

I finished my deciphering in 30 seconds, and replied with a text that read "Don't wanna."

A few minutes after that——

Title: Please

Message: I want you to come help me pick out a birthday present for Kobato.

"Hahh..." I let out a sigh.

She should've just said that from the start if that's all she wanted ...

"Wanna go to Nagaya together tomorrow then?" I replied.

I didn't get a response after waiting a while, so I started doing some homework.

Roughly an hour later, Rika finally sent me a reply.

Title: Re: Re: Please

Message: I got so excited I came a little bit. What are you going to do about it?

Nothing, that's what.

I sent her a message that said, "So, are we going together or not? " to get her confirmation.

Five seconds later I got my reply. Damn she's fast!

Title: Of course!

I have much to learn, but I hope we can still enjoy our time together tomorrow. <(_ _)>

Later that day, I ate lunch with Kobato, went back to my room after cleaning up, flopped on my bed, and started reading a book.

But, as I did, my phone started buzzing, signaling that I'd gotten yet another text message.

It was exactly one o'clock in the afternoon.

I checked who sent the text, and saw that it was from Yukimura Kusunoki.

"Yukimura!?"

I was a little startled.

Up until now, I've never sent Yukimura any text messages aside from the ones during summer to say whether or not I was going to club that day.

I've never gotten any messages from her either, aside from her replies to the aforementioned texts I sent, and those usually only said something like "Understood, Aniki."

Furthermore, those texts I sent out that she got were actually sent to everyone in the Neighbors Club at once, hence, I've never actually had a one-on-one conversation with her before.

Who would've thought she'd ever send a text to me... I was still thoroughly shocked, but managed to nervously open the text.

Title: A Brief Note to Mr. Kodaka Hasegawa

Message: Dear Mr. Kodaka Hasegawa, I wish to begin by expressing my sincere, boundless joy at your good health in this fine season. Please forgive me for sending you this letter on such short notice. I am truly sorry to trouble you when you are most certainly busy, but there is a certain matter I simply must enquire about; hence, I have penned this message to you. Now then, while it is indeed rude of me, allow me to quickly move to the main topic I wish to enquire about. What would be a suitable gift for your younger sister? My apologies for placing it at the end of the letter, but allow me to offer a final prayer for your continued good health and fortune in the future to come.

"The lead-in is way too long! And the actual message is so short! "

The message was written using a very formal introduction template, and the only part Yukimura actually wrote herself was, without a doubt, the "main topic" she asked me about.

That part of just asking the question straight without mincing words is definitely Yukimura-like, but that introduction... Anyway ... How should I answer her...?

If I tell her "Get Kobato XXX" then she'd probably do just that, but that doesn't feel quite right.

Hence, I replied as thus:

Title: About Choosing a Present

Message: I'm going shopping in Nagaya tomorrow, you wanna come with? I'll help you pick a present.

Five seconds later—— damn that was fast! Anyway, five seconds later, I got Yukimura's reply.

I never thought she'd be fast at sending texts too!

Title: To Aniki

I have much to learn, but I hope we can still enjoy our time together tomorrow.

I made a wry smile after on account of her reply being exactly the same as Rika's.

It was now even later that day, around 11 at night.

I've got plans tomorrow, so I guess I'll go to sleep a little early... as I told myself that, yet another text message arrived.

This time it was from Yozora.

Title: It's not like this is that big of a deal, I'm just asking.

Does Yozora want to ask me about what to get Kobato for her birthday too...?

I opened up the actual message, and my prediction was spot on.

Message: I want you to help me pick out a present for your little sister. There's not much time until the party, so tomorrow would be good, but it's not like I absolutely need your help, and it's not like this is that big of a deal, I'm just asking. It's not like choosing a present by myself would be a problem, OK? It's just that I happened to realize just now that you've probably got a better chance of picking out something she'd like, since you're her brother, so I figured I'd try asking you to come help. It's not like I'd mind if you don't want to though, so it's not like you have to worry about it.

"You too...? And why did you have to keep saying 'it's not like'.. ."

I remarked in a quiet voice while typing up a reply to Yozora.

I'd already entered the same message before, so the auto-complete feature let me finish in a few seconds.

Title: Re: It's not like this is that big of a deal, I'm just asking.

Message: I'm going shopping in Nagaya tomorrow, you wanna come with?

Annnnd sent.

I thought she'd reply right away, so I sat there waiting for a while, but I didn't get Yozora's brief reply asking when and where we should meet up until over an hour later.

Anyway, that's how we all ended up deciding to go shopping for birthday presents down in Nagaya tomorrow.

Looking back on it, all I did today was text people, do my homework, read, and play games.

Most of the time, all I do is homework, read, and play games, so I think I can say today was a bit more "normal" than usual.

On The Train

It was the following day, Sunday afternoon.

After eating an early breakfast with Kobato, I left home, got on the train, and got off at Tohya station.

It's about 10 minutes to one right now.

I went to the waiting room, and found that Sena, Rika, Yukimura, and Yozora were all there already.

Sena was in a very Sena-like flashy outfit.

Yozora was in denim hot pants and a shirt that showed off her midriff.

Rika was in her standard lab coat. Her hair was a light brown color, with the back of it going straight down, and the sides poofing out a little bit before curving back towards her face. Oh, and she wasn't wearing glasses.

Yukimura was in a butler uniform... Man, is she loyal to whatever Yozora says...

The four of them were all sitting apart from each other for some reason too. Sena and Yozora both looked obviously upset about something, and it might just be my imagination, but Rika and Yukimura seemed irritated too.

"...Hey guys."

I called out to them in a tiny voice, since other people were in the waiting room as well.

"Whadda *you* want?"

Yozora and Sena both shot a glare at me.

"Hahh..."

Rika stood up as she let out a big sigh, and came over to me.

Yukimura followed behind her, expressionless, after which Yozora and Sena came too.

"H-hey."

"....."

Rika left the waiting room, completely ignoring my greeting.

Yukimura stopped in front of me, and gave a light bow.

She then lifted her head slightly, and I saw that she had her lips pursed a little bit.

"Yukimura...?"

"It is nothing."

She lifted her head fully, and then walked out of the waiting room after Rika.

Yozora and Sena both glanced at me with a look that could kill before walking out of the room as well.

Right as they did, the train to Nagaya pulled into the station.

The four of them quickly got onto the train, leaving me to hurriedly chase after them and get on too.

The train had some empty seats, but there wasn't anywhere we could all sit together, so we all stood together near the door.

It shouldn't be a problem, since it's only a 20 minute ride to our destination.

The doors then closed, and the train left the station.

We stood there in silence while the train gently shook us back and forth for a while, but Yozora, who was leaning against the wall with her arms folded, opened her mouth at long last.

"...So, Kodaka, what exactly is the meaning of this?"

She asked in a deep, serious sounding voice.

"The meaning...? What do you mean?"

"...Why are Meat and them all here?"

"Why...? 'Cause we're all going together."

"See?" she said, looking over at Sena, Rika, and Yukimura.

"I didn't hear anything about that."

Sena said in an irritated tone of voice.

"Ahh, yeah I forgot to tell you guys that we were all going to buy Kobato some birthday presents together. I mean, we're all here for the same thing, so we might as well go together, right?"

Sena went "Muu..." and puffed her cheeks out before saying,

"...It's not like I disagree with you, but... something about this doesn't sit right with me... Especially the fact that you seriously don't think anything about it..."

"What about me?"

"...Nothing, idiot."

All I could do was tilt my head in confusion at Sena's frown.

Rika then went "Hahh..." and let out another big sigh.

"...Rika thought things were probably going to turn out like this. .. The Rika who was so excited to have been invited out by Kodaka-senpai was such an idiot. It's obvious this is how it was going to end up if you think about it rationally... Hahh..."

Rika had an incredibly farsighted expression on her face that looked nothing like that of a young girl's.

"...Resignation is key... You have to get used to it if you want to be with Kodaka-senpai... Got that, everyone?"

Rika turned to face the window with a hint of sorrow mixed into her expression, and went "Heh." as she let out a desolate laugh .

...What the heck is she even going on about?

"I understand that now, Ms. Rika... This has been a lesson in the cruel truths of this harsh world we live in... Forgive me for forgetting my place in this world, and foolishly dreaming of things beyond my status, Aniki..."

Yukimura made a smile so fragile it looked like it could fade any moment.

"You've got something bugging you too...?"

"...Hmmm... Still, I wonder, is that denseness of his real...? Or is it that... that's just how he wants things to be...?"

Rika quietly said as she stared out the window at the scenery flowing by. The corners of her mouth formed a smile, but that look in her eyes had an acute coldness to it.

"...Rika?"

Rika returned my gaze and made a tender smile.

"It's nothing at all~ I was just thinking how interesting you always are, that's all."

"What the heck?"

"Kukuku... You do not yet need to know... You will understand when the time comes... is something Rika's always wanted to try saying."

I'm not really sure what Rika was talking about there.

I get the feeling that she really did just want to try saying it, so I just left it at that.

"...But yeah, you still dress like that even on days off, huh."

"Like what?"

"Your lab coat over your uniform."

I pointed out what I was getting at with my previous statement.

I guessed she'd be wearing it, since she wore it to karaoke, the pool, and the amusement park too, but she'd been messing with her hair color and hairstyle ever since the start of the new semester , so I secretly thought to myself that she might start changing her outfit around a bit too.

After clarifying what I meant, Rika said, with a hint of pride in her voice,

"It's because this is Rika's identity. It's a given for all science type characters after all."

I replied to her faintly prideful statement by saying,

"I see... It's **weird** that you're so particular about it, but there's nothing I can do about that either..."

"!?"

Rika's face went stiff after hearing the comment I'd made with a faint wry smile on my face.

"I-it's... weird...!?"

Rika was shaking all over as though in shock for some reason.

"Hm? Well yeah, obviously it's **weird**."

I repeated it, causing Rika to timidly look over in Sena's direction.

"Eh? Your outfit? Yeah, it's **weird**."

"Oufgh..."

She made a face that almost looked like she was about to cry before turning towards Yozora next.

"Did you think it *wasn't* **weird**?"

Yozora said in a spectacularly icy voice.

"Auu..."

She then adjusted her gaze to face her last hope, Yukimura, who simply tilted her head, and told her,

"Of course it is **weird**. Is there something I am missing?"

I was a little relieved to hear that even Yukimura thought the way Rika dressed was weird.

In fact, now that I think about it, the only reason she wore the maid outfit and wears the butler uniform is because Yozora tricked her into doing it. She might actually have pretty normal fashion sense herself.

"Ummm... Could you perhaps tell me which parts of it specifically are weird...?"

"The thing is, no matter how **weird** I think someone's clothes are personally, I'm not so rude that I'd fault the person who insists on wearing them for doing so."

"I don't care if you have to be rude, please just tell me!"

"Ehh?"

I hesitated, but eventually gave in after seeing the serious look on Rika's face.

"Hmm... Back when you had black hair and glasses, I didn't think the lab coat was all that bad. It had like, a more serious feel to it. Wearing it out at the amusement park is still a no go though... But yeah, after you started messing with your hair, it started to get

really awkward. It's like leaving your back open when you go to cover your front... or maybe not. Basically, the way you focus so much on your hair and not at all on anything else makes no sense... That lab coat of yours is really worn out too. Your hair does look nice though, it probably took a while to do, right? Looks like you added some highlights to make it stand out more."

Rika's cheeks went red after hearing my opinion.

"S-so you did notice... Not bad, Senpai..."

"Hehe, I told you, didn't I? I did a lot of research about hair stuff before, so I know a lot about it."

"God that self-satisfied look is annoying..." Sena quietly said.

"Hmm... Still, I guess it is weird after all, huh... My lab coat I mean..."

Rika said in a meek tone of voice while grabbing the collar of her lab coat.

"...Hmm... But Rika gets the feeling there's no point in her fussing over her clothes anyway... It's true that after Sena-senpai and the rest of you complimented my hair once before that I figured I'd try messing around with it a bit, though..."

Rika said in a self-derisive manner with the corners of her mouth pulled up slightly.

"…Rika even got ignored after changing clothes right in front of him too…"

Rika mumbled something to herself with a sad smile on her face .

I don't really get it, but I guess she's got her own stuff to worry about too.

Rika does actually look pretty cute though; some cute clothes would probably look pretty good on her...

"Rika does actually look pretty cute though; some cute clothes would probably look pretty good on her..."

"!?"

Rika's face went *poof* and flared up in an instant.

...I get the feeling something like this happened before...

"Uh, did I blurt that out just now?"

"Yes, you did! Loud and clear!!"

Rika strongly nodded her head up and down.

"Ahh, that's pretty embarrassing, haha."

"You could at least *look* like you're actually embarrassed when you say that!"

Rika pursed her lips and quickly turned her back to me.

Then all of a sudden she turned back around, with a fairly creepy grin on her face.

She then came over to me in a strangely coy way, and placed her hand on my shoulder.

"I mean like, come on, geez~ Senpai you tease, so you *do* like Rika more than you let on~ Uheheheh... You should be more honest like that all the time you bad boy you~"

Rika said, sounding like a drunk old cougar as she kept patting me on the shoulder.

"Ugh."

I swiped her hand off my shoulder, and took a step back.

"Now then... I suppose this means I'll pay attention to my clothes now too. This certainly isn't the time to be wearing stuff like a lab coat."

"Hey, wait, what about your identity as a science type character ?"

"Kukuku, fool, she's already dead."

"Your identity sure isn't worth much, is it..."

"No no, being able to think flexibly is a very important skill for a scientist. Worrying about the actual form things take means one has much to learn..."

She might've had a point, but I don't think I've heard many lines that sounded less sincere than the one I heard just now.

"By the way, Sena-senpai."

"Eh?"

Sena was taken aback by Rika suddenly addressing her.

"I'm thinking I might as well look at some clothes since we're going out to such a nice shopping district, so do you think you could tell me some good stores to check out in Nagaya?"

"Eh, y-you're asking me!?"

Sena seemed to be flustered for some reason.

"Yes. I thought you'd have some good advice because of how fashionably you dress."

"Umm... I-I don't go to Nagaya very often, so I don't think I can help you much with that, ahaha..."

"Oh, is that so? Well then how about where you usually buy clothes?"

"U-usually, I, well, you know... I go to this high class brand-name shop near my house... yeah... I guess?"

"Huh? Isn't your place surrounded by mountains and paddy fields? Is there really a high class brand-name shop out there...?"

"Ugh-"

Sena's face went stiff at my little remark.

"Sena-senpai...?"

Rika shot a suspicious look over at Sena.

I could see a cold sweat run down Sena's cheek as she looked away.

"By the way, Sena-senpai, that blouse looks really nice~ Where did you buy it?"

"Eh, I-I'm not so sure~... I can't really remember, ahaha..."

"....."

"Ahaha....."

"....."

".....Uuu~~"

Sena finally broke down after having Rika stare at her, and confessed to everything, half in tears.

"Sorry, I lied... Stella always buys my clothes for me... I always let Stella pick out what I should wear when I go out too... She does my hair, makeup, and everything else for me too..."

Stella, you're amazing... how can you even do all that?

"Meat. Have you by chance never even gone to a hair salon before?"

"A-a hair salon? No, I've never gone... I always get my hair cut at home..."

"...Heh."

Yozora made a faintly triumphant smile at Sena's answer.

"W-what's that smirk for... It's kind of pissing me off..."

"Oh, no real reason. I was just a little surprised to hear a high school girl still got her hair cut at home."

"Yozora..."

I gave a look that said "are you serious?" to Yozora (a high school girl who had been cutting her own hair at home until earlier this year in August), but she just casually looked away.

"...Hahh..."

Rika let out a small sigh, took out a pair of glasses from a pocket on her lab coat, and put them on.

She then put her right hand on the frame of her glasses, and stared at Sena with a cold look in her eyes...

".....Female power level's only five, huh... What trash..."

...What are the glasses supposed to be, a scouter?

"W-what's the big deal!? It's easier that way, since Stella never messed up and all..."

Sena awkwardly said with her face tinged red, but she does have a point. Your female power level probably isn't going to go up much when you've got someone who can do nearly everything for you.

I mean, even I only learned how to cook, do the chores at home, handle being surrounded by several opponents, and kill time when I'm alone because I had to. Although, the cooking and chores aside, I would've liked to have lead a life where I didn't need to know how to do those last two.

Seeing Sena stand there with a frown on her face made me realize, once again, that she really does come from a rich family.

"Hahh... Sena-senpai is useless, so Yozora-senpai, would you mind giving Rika some advice instead?"

"Me?"

Yozora seemed to be a little lost as to what to tell her.

"Yes. Where do you usually buy your clothes, Yozora-senpai?"

"**Online.**" she answered immediately.

"Grea~t, I ju~st knew it~" Rika said with a wry smile, and then continued,

"But still, despite what you say, you *do* have pretty good fashion sense, Yozora-senpai. I mean, you know how to make clothes that'd normally be hard to wear look good on yourself, and honestly speaking, I've always thought that you dress pretty fashionably."

"All I do is buy whatever I see the models wearing in some magazine or online."

"...I see. I'm jealous of how you can just take exactly what a model in a fashion magazine was wearing and have it fit you perfectly. Usually you have to mix and match things, otherwise it'll just end up being a huge mess, but yes, I see... god damn it..."

I got the feeling that she experienced things becoming "a huge mess" in the past from the way she said that. The truth is I have too .

"Ohh...? Is that how it is?"

Yozora gave her clothes a once-over, seemingly more happy to hear that than she was letting on.

"As always, you're incredibly cute today, too." said Rika.

"...Hold on. ...I-I'm... cute...?"

Yozora made a stern look on her face, as though there were something wrong with what Rika said for some reason.

"? Yes, you look very feminine and cute. Especially your legs. They've got a sexy-cute look to them that stops short of being slutty. Of course, that only works because you have such beautiful legs, Yozora-senpai."

"Wha...!? F-femini-... Sexy... cu-...!?"

A look of utter shock rose to Yozora's face, and she then looked over at me for some reason.

"W-what do you think, Kodaka? My outfit... isn't feminine or anything, right? It's actually kind of masculine, right?"

.....? What the heck is she talking about?

Apparently what I was thinking was written all over my face, because Yozora went "Eh...!?" and opened her eyes wide.

"You being surprised about all this is what doesn't make any sense here... Masculine? Seriously...? I'd actually say you look kind of... s-sexy... ya' know?"

I replied, all the while taking peeks at her dazzling, white legs.

Yozora's face turned deep red in the blink of an eye.

"D-don't be stupid! This outfit was in a magazine's 'Autumn Boyish Fashion Techniques' section!"

"...Yozora." "Yozora-senpai..."

Rika and I both directed a look of pity at her.

"W-what..."

"...You see, Yozora, 'boyish' doesn't necessarily mean the same thing as 'masculine'."

"Wha...!?"

"Well, it's true that talking and dressing like a guy is considered boyish, but... in terms of fashion, boyish usually means something more like 'gender neutral' and is only used to bring out your more feminine traits. I don't know about the magazine you read, Yozora-senpai, but in the boyish style section, didn't it say 'Super Cute Coordination Tips' or 'Knock Your Boyfriend Off His Feet' or some stuff like that?"

"N-now that you mention it, I think it did..."

A cold sweat formed on Yozora's brow.

"That's ridiculous... Then what have I been doing all this time..."

"How did you not notice any of this before... Have you ever seen a guy walking around showing his thighs and belly button before?"

Yozora hung her head in defeat, and started mumbling something.

"...But I've never paid attention to any other guys' clothes before..."

"Eh?"

"N-nothing!"

Yozora raised her voice in a hurry, followed by her cheeks flaring up into a shade of red again as she moved to cover her belly button with both hands as though she'd just realized something.

Rika then said, as if teasing her,

"...I used to think 'Wow, Yozora-senpai must be quite fashion conscious to keep on wearing clothes that show her belly button despite it being so chilly out lately~'... but apparently I was wrong."

"Uuuuu~~"

Yozora turned to face the window, her face beet red.

"Keheheh... By the way, in Rika's opinion, hot pants make a girl's butt look way sexier than a simple swimsuit or some underwear."

"I know, right!?"

".....Kodaka-senpai..."

Rika looked at me like I was some kind of strange bug after my involuntary outburst of agreement. Come on, you're the one who said it...

"Khh... Kodaka you idiottt...!"

Yozora was teary-eyed as she covered her butt with both hands.

Luckily for Yozora, we reached Nagaya station about two minutes later.

Nagaya station is basically the center of everything around here , and is far bigger than Tohya station, with more people passing through it than Tohya could ever hope to have.

Yozora, who can't stand crowds, seemed to be a little sick.

She then bolted out of the train and passed through the ticket gate like she was running away from something, leaving us to follow after her.

Right as we passed through the ticket gate, Yozora quickly turned around to face us, and said,

"...I-I'm going to do a little shopping now! Don't follow me, Kodaka!"

"By shopping you mean for clothes, right? That's fine with me, but... you gonna be OK? It's pretty crowded..."

"Uu... I-I'll be fine!"

Yozora answered, hiding her belly button with one hand, and her butt with her purse.

"Yozora-senpai, Rika will accompany you."

Rika, also bad with crowds, seemed to be sick like Yozora was.

"Hm... I see. Let's go then."

Yozora started to turn around, but stopped and said...

"? What's wrong, Yukimura?"

I noticed that Yukimura, who was standing next to me, was staring at Yozora.

"...No, it is nothing, Anego..."

She said, and then proceeded to look at Yozora's face, my face, and the butler uniform she was wearing, in that order.

Seeing Yukimura like that, I quietly whispered to her,

"...Yukimura, think you can go shopping with Yozora and Rika in my place? Make sure they don't faint out in this crowd for me, OK?"

Yukimura's eyes and mouth opened a bit wider than usual before a gentle smile bloomed to life on her face.

"Yes. Leave it to me, Aniki."

She gave me a quick bow, and then walked over towards Yozora.

Yozora, Rika, and Yukimura then disappeared into the crowd...

"Alright then, wanna go look around for a while until they're done?"

I asked Sena, who was now the only person left with me, to which she replied by saying, "Yeah," as she gave me a ridiculously happy nod with a big smile on her face.

It's A Date No Matter How You Look At It. Seriously, etc.

"So, where should we go?"

I asked Sena after seeing Yozora and the other two walk off.

After a brief pause to mull it over, Sena replied,

"Hmm... What kind of present do you think would raise Kobato-chan's affection level the most? Some kind of Kuroneku goods probably, right?"

"Don't say stupid crap like 'affection level', this isn't a galge."

I gave a quick retort, and then said,

"Well, it's true she collects Kuroneku stuff, but I think she's already got everything she wants. I already reserved that new game that's coming out for her too."

"I see... I don't really know how much a normal middle schooler gets for their allowance, but does she really have enough to buy *everything* she wants?"

"I suppose she does get more than average... But yeah, our dad dotes on Kobato like you wouldn't believe. Whenever she asks for a game or a DVD or something Dad'll buy it for her no questions asked; that's how she got most of her stuff. She doesn't spend a whole lot of her own money though, so I'm pretty sure she's got quite a bit saved up."

I have worried that Dad spoils her too much, but when I think about how he probably only does it to make up for how he isn't able to be at home with us much, it's hard for me to fault him for it.

...And I mean, it *was* me who taught Kobato that you can get Dad to buy you any toy you want.

"Kufufu... Your dad sounds like the kind of guy I could have a good drink with, with Kobato as our side-dish..."

A big grin found its way to Sena's face.

"You know, you're..."

"T-that was just a slip of the tongue, OK? I'm underage, obviously I wouldn't drink any alcohol, sheesh."

"I don't care about the alcohol, just don't go making Kobato into your 'side-dish'."

I was serious about that, too.

"Hmm... If just getting her something expensive won't work, then... How about something rare? Like a limited edition figure or something."

"Can you get something like that in time for her birthday?"

"I don't know, but if one of the guys in my class has it I can make him give it to me as a tribute."

Sena casually said, as though she were some kind of queen.

"...Hm, but if I remember right, Kobato doesn't really like figures."

"Really?"

"Yeah. She likes games, CDs, manga, etc. because you can play with them, but I don't think she really cares about decoration-type stuff."

"But wasn't she happy about getting that colored paper with the director of the Kuroneku anime's signature on it back at the amusement park?"

"Ahh, that thing, huh... When we got home that day she really took care of it, and put it on top of her desk, but when I was cleaning her room the other day, I saw that it was stuffed on her bookshelf in-between some manga."

"O-oh... I see..."

Sena seemed to be quite shocked, causing her face to stiffen up.

That colored paper was basically something Kobato got thanks to Sena, so having it treated so carelessly must hurt.

"Muu... Then what on Earth do I get her... I had a feeling the Kobato route wasn't going to be easy... She already has all the DVDs and character songs, right? I wonder what other Kuroneku goods there are..."

"...Hey, why not go for something that isn't related to Kuroneku ?"

Sena's eyes went wide at my proposal.

"You do have a point there... Then how do you think I should pick a gift?"

"I dunno... maybe get her something that you'd like...?"

"Something I'd like!? Obviously I'd want Kobato-chan!"

"You're not getting her."

I coldly replied to Sena, whose eyes were sparkling.

"What about like in a galge? They have events where the girl puts herself in a box with ribbons wrapped around her, and then pops out and says 'I've got your present~ Ri~ght Here~♥'"

"You know there's a 100% chance Kobato would start crying if you actually did that, right?"

You'd totally creep me out too.

"I'm confident that I'd *totally* make a 'mistake' if I got a box that had Kobato inside wearing nothing but a ribbon!"

"Nobody cares about your stupid fantasies!"

"Ahh, geez! Why is Kobato-chan so cute... I wish Kobato-chan was my little sister instead..."

"Sena~ Come back to us here in reality~"

"Oh be quiet, I *am* looking at reality. I am super seriously considering realistic methods for making Kobato-chan mine, got it!?"

"That's even worse!"

...Maybe I should give up on trying to help her find a present...

"Hey~ hey~ there's gotta be something, right? What other kinda stuff does Kobato-chan like~?"

"Uu..."

Sena was happily looking up at me with her head cocked to the side a bit, and honestly, her desires for my little sister hidden inside that head of hers aside, she looks really cute. So much so, that I accidentally let myself be captivated by her looks.

".....Ahh, I got it. I know something Kobato'd like for sure."

"Eh, what is it!?"

I then bluntly stated to Sena, whose eyes were sparkling in anticipation,

"Meat."

"Eh!?"

Sena made a ridiculously happy face for some reason.

Once I'd realized why that was,

"No-no-no-no, not you!! Obviously I meant the kind you can eat !!"

"I-I know that..."

Sena said while blushing. ...No, you definitely thought I meant you just now.

"Kobato's loved meat for as long as I can remember—— Again, I am not talking about you!!"

I had to interrupt myself to yell at Sena, who'd just made another stupid grin on her face after hearing what I said.

"I-I told you I know that! But, it's like... my face just grins on its own..."

I dunno if there's any hope left for this one.

I then sighed and continued from where I left off.

"...Kobato'll eat any kind of meat. Cow, pig, chicken, horse, sheep, you name it. As for cooking, hamburger patties, steak, yakiniku, roast beef, fried chicken, tatsutaage, Genghis Khan, boiled fish, hot dogs... yeah, she'll pretty much devour any meat dish, too. She loves anything if it has meat in it. I'd totally get her meat for her birthday. I think some high grade Japanese beef would be especially good myself. The ones with the best seasoning have a bit too much fat though, and I don't—— I mean, *Kobato* doesn't really like it that way, so I think going one grade lower is probably a good idea."

"*You* think...? You sure that isn't just something that *you* want to eat?"

Sena retorted to me, with her eyes squinted in doubt.

"...Well, yeah, but Kobato really does love meat—— not you!! ... She really likes eating meat."

"Meat... huh..."

Sena made a face that looked like she was deep in thought for some reason.

"...Now that you mention it, she *did* react that time I invited her to the amusement park when I told her I'd get her some tasty hamburger meat..."

"See? I'm telling you, she'll totally love it."

"But Kodaka, calm down and really think this over."

"?"

"...Who gets somebody food for their birthday?"

".....Oh yeah."

...I had to have Sena point out something so obvious to me. It feels like I just lost at something.

"Well, I don't think food is a bad idea if it makes Kobato-chan happy, but... It's like, I want to give her something to remember me by... Something she can keep by her side whenever I'm not around would be nice... It'd be with her all the time, even when she's in the bath, or sleeping... Uheh..."

...I think she actually had a good idea there, aside from the creepy laugh at the end.

"Anyway, food can be like my last resort. Let's go look around the department store for now, OK? We might end up finding something good."

"Yeah, we might."

And so, Sena and I began walking towards the train station building.

According to Sena, the department store "Ohtoriya" inside Nagaya station is the biggest in the whole area, and sells just about anything, from clothes, to accessories, to toys (at least, that's what Stella told her).

"OK, so where to first?"

I asked Sena while looking at the directory after we entered the building.

"I guess the toy section first... Is there anywhere you wanna go, Kodaka?"

"I wanna buy some meat from the basement floor. It's not related to Kobato's birthday, I just really wanna eat some meat today."

"OK, the toy section it is. Looks like it's on the eighth floor."

Sena ignored my answer splendidly and started walking off.

There was a crowd of people in front of the elevators though, and it looked like it'd take a while to get on one.

"...Wanna take the escalators? Waiting would just be a pain anyway."

"Yeah, you're right."

She nodded in agreement, and we started walking towards the escalators instead.

Also, the first floor was the accessories section, so we checked it out on the way.

"...Hey, Kodaka. Do you think Kobato-chan would like a ring or something...?"

Sena said while looking at a diamond ring (worth 300,000 yen) with a serious look on her face.

"...She might be interested in that stuff, but please, don't buy her anything too expensive. She's still too young for that stuff."

"You're like Kobato-chan's guardian, aren't you, Kodaka?"

"I'm her older brother and her guardian. But yeah... I don't think it's a good idea for her to get used to that expensive stuff that doesn't even really suit her so soon."

"Ohh...? Huh, you're actually a pretty good guardian."

Sena said along with a little chuckle.

"Personally, I think some jewelry would look super good on Kobato-chan, but OK. I won't go and buy her anything too expensive as a present if you don't want me to."

We left the accessories section after that little exchange, and got on the escalator.

We got off at the third floor to check out some wallets and purses, and then got back on to go farther up.

"Yozora and them might be in here too," noted Sena.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth floors were all for women's clothing, making it highly likely that someone would come here if they were looking for clothes around Nagaya station.

"Yeah, they might be..." I said in agreement, followed by, "You don't want to look at any clothes while we're here?"

Sena went "Hmmm," and after thinking it over a bit, she replied,

"No, I'm fine. Looking for Kobato-chan's present comes first."

"I see."

While I was feeling a tad impressed by Sena, who usually does whatever she feels like, we passed the seventh floor (men's clothing), and arrived at the toy section on the eighth floor.

"...Hmm... Nothing seems to fit quite right..."

Sena groaned with a difficult look on her face as we walked around the toy section.

The toy section at Ohtoriya was definitely big, but the main target was little kids (although, technically the real target is the parents of those little kids, so maybe saying the main target is older adults would be better). In any case, it wasn't very suited for picking out a present for a middle schooler like Kobato.

"...Hey, you think Kobato-chan would like a YuriCure power wand?"

"I don't think so."

I could tell she was actually being serious about that, so I gave her a serious answer in response.

"...But don't you think magical girl stuff would look super good on her?"

"....."

I imagined Kobato Hasegawa (almost 14 years old) playing make-believe YuriCure, and sadly, it didn't feel all that weird.

"...Ah! I've seen this twister game in video games before! I'd be able to crawl all over Kobato-chan if we played this! What do you think!?"

"...That's just what you want, isn't it?"

I didn't fail to notice the cold sweat that ran down Sena's cheek just then.

"Hmm... Maybe I should just go with something analog then. How about shogi, or chess or something?"

"We've got pretty nice sets of both those games at home, but Kobato got bored of it before she even learned all the rules."

Incidentally, I actually like shogi a lot. Although, I don't have anyone to play with, so all I do is try to solve what-if scenarios.

"Ah, they've got jigsaw puzzles. There's even a Kuroneku one!"

"Ah, yeah, I bet Kobato'd like that a lot. I wish you'd go with something else, though."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because there's a 100% chance she'll get bored of it faster than the speed of light, leaving me to finish the thing for her!"

Kobato's bugged Dad to get her some jigsaw puzzles before, but Dad and I always ended up doing all the work. She always says, " I'll do it myself next time!", but Dad, just how many times are you going to fall for that before you catch on?

...Although, puzzles are a good way to kill time, so it's not like I totally hate 'em or anything.

We made a full pass around the toy section, but in the end, Sena never was able to find anything that seemed particularly good.

"Picking out a present's pretty hard, isn't it~"

"Yeah..."

I nodded at Sena with a slightly tired look on my face.

We left the toy section, and got on the escalator to go up to the ninth floor.

A sign hanging from the ceiling caught my eye along the way.

"They're selling household appliances on the ninth floor, huh~ No point in going there then."

"H-hold on a second."

I hurriedly called out to stop Sena, who was about to skip past the ninth floor.

"What?"

"...Perhaps we could take just a smidgen of our time to inspect this floor as well."

I made a serious, slightly formal request to Sena, who tilted her head and gave me a dubious look.

"Why? Is there something you want to go see?"

"Yeah. Apparently they're having a sale on this one brand I like."

"Ohh? Well, whatever, let's go then."

Thus, we started walking through the aisles on the ninth floor.

"So, you actually have a brand you like and stuff?"

"Sure do. I can't buy from them often, but I usually check out any new stuff they release."

"Ohh...? What brand is it?"

"I doubt you'd know the name."

I said, causing Sena to make a bit of an irritated look on her face .

"Just tell me what it is. I don't do my own shopping, but I still know about all the brands and stuff!"

"Oh...? Fine, it's a brand called 'D-Four'... See, you don't know it, do you?"

"O-of course I've heard of it!"

Sena answered in an agitated voice for some reason.

"I-I actually like that brand a lot too. In fact, I collect their stuff! I've liked them for about six years now!"

"Oh really? So right around when they put out their first big item, huh... They're pretty famous now, but yeah, six years ago is right about when D-Four started getting popular in Japan, isn't it? Pretty impressive you've had your eye on them that long."

Sena took my praise, and started getting full of herself.

"I-I know, right!? D-don't lump me together with all those other posers! I loved that thing so much I went and bought 10 of them!"

"Ohh? That's pretty amazing."

"Well yeah, that's what anyone who really likes it would do, right~?"

"Yeah, you must really like it... I never thought anyone would buy 10 **pressure cookers**..."

"Yep, I love pressure cooke—— pressure cookers!?"

After our little back and forth, we arrived at our destination.

"D-Four ~Autumn Appetite Fair~"

"By the way, D-Four is a cookware manufacturer."

I casually mentioned to Sena, who was standing frozen stiff in front of the D-Four section.

A cold sweat formed on her forehead... and then all of a sudden she went "Ohh!" and nodded.

"...Ohh, I see now~, y-you meant this D-Four. I thought you were talking about a different D-Four~"

"A different D-Four? Yeah, sure..."

I make a quick remark to her and left it at that before walking into the fair.

"Hey, wait, Kodaka! I mean it, I just thought you were talking abou——"

She did this before when she pretended to know about " Kurogane no Necromancer" too, and back then all she managed to

do was make Kobato mad. You'd think she'd learn a little from her mistakes.

Leaving Sena and her patheticness aside, I went to look around the D-Four fair.

The various, alluring frying pans they had lined up were truly a sight to see, and just looking at them got me excited.

Across from the frying pans was a similar display of an innumerable amount of saucepans, which made me want to go get some ingredients and try them out right away.

"Uoh... 35% off on their new saucepan they put out earlier this spring!? Seriously!?"

I really wanted it back when it came out, but the saucepan we have now is only two years old and still completely spotless (you can easily wash anything off of a D-Four product, so as long as you take decent care of it, it'll be like brand new for a long time!), hence , I ended up not buying us a new one.

Even now, half a year later, our saucepan is still as clean as ever, but... still, now that I can see it again, I can tell how nice it'd be to have...

"*Gulp*..."

...Ahh... It looks so nice~ I can't get enough of that special shine it has~... It's like the term curvilinear beauty was made specifically to describe this saucepan... Man, I want it so bad~... Maybe I'll buy

it~..... It's not like having more than one saucepan can hurt, right ...?

"*Slurp*..."

"Kodaka, you're disgusting..."

Sena said something as she stood next to me, but I couldn't have cared less.

And so, about an hour passed.

Sena, who had an annoyed frown on her face, and I were sitting in a café in the food court on the 12th floor.

A big bag with the Ohtoriya logo lay by my feet.

Hehe... I totally bought it... and not just one saucepan, but two!!

How could I not? They were half off if I bought two... Two for the price of one... What a steal...! Also, I even bought a new frying pan, since I was here and all!

"Uheh..."

"Gross..."

Sena's frown intensified upon seeing the smile I'd let leak out.

"Sheesh... Why did I have to spend an hour waiting for you to finish shopping... Isn't it usually the other way around!?"

"Sorry..."

I apologized to Sena, who was clearly irritated.

I blame it on that kitchen knife section right next to the D-Four one.

Thanks to that, I spent an hour entranced by all the items for sale, completely forgetting about Sena.

I let it go this time due to my budget constraints, but I'm so buying that Chinese kitchen knife next time I see it.

"You're making that stupid grin again..."

Sena gave me a look of disgust.

"...Sheesh, what's so fun about looking at frying pans..."

"Hey now, don't go putting a D-Four frying pan on the same level as some other brand's. Here, let me tell you why D-Four's are so special."

"No thanks."

"Oh, okay..."

Too bad.

Sena looked like she was pouting as she took a sip of her soda that had some fruit and ice cream piled into it, and then let out a small sigh.

"You are seriously, like... weird, you know that...?"

Sena said, in a strangely meaningful tone of voice.

"W-what's it matter if I like cookware?"

"...That's obviously not the only thing I'm talking about here, idiot."

"? What do you mean?"

"Who knows."

Sena poked at her ice cream as she feigned ignorance.

"Muu..."

I sipped some of my lemon squash, wanting to know what she was getting at.

"Still, Yozora and them sure are taking their time."

I said while checking the time on my phone.

I sent a text earlier, and apparently they really were looking at clothes in Ohtoriya, so we'd decided to meet up at the entrance on the first floor after they finished shopping.

"All girls spend a long time shopping."

"How would you know, you don't even buy your own clothes."

I retorted to Sena, who had a self-satisfied look on her face.

"S-shut up. That's what every galge protagonist always says!"

Sena's face went red.

"...Well, yeah, that might be true as a general rule, but you seem like you'd be a quick shopper. You're always quick to order your food, and you don't really look at the stuff on sale for long either."

It was the same at this café, too. Before I figured out what I wanted, Sena fearlessly ordered the "Tropical Gorgeous Soda Float Special" without even a hint of hesitation at saying that embarrassing name out loud. Even when we were in the accessory and toy sections, all she'd do was glance at something before deciding not to buy it and immediately moving on to the next item .

She did the same thing at the pool and amusement park, too. She only looked at the menu for a second before picking something to order.

"What? You got a problem with it?"

"No, I actually think that side of you is kinda refreshing."

She doesn't hesitate or worry about things, which often causes her to fail or take a huge detour on the way to her goal, but—— I think that attitude is both Sena Kashiwazaki's strength, as well as her charm.

"D-don't get all serious all of a sudden, idiot..."

Her cheeks went red as she blew into her straw, making bubbles in her soda.

She then spent the next little while focused on finishing her fruit and ice cream, and then——

"So hey, what do you think of, like, Yozora, Rika, and Yukimura ?"

She asked, quietly, suddenly, while eating her food.

"? What do I think of them?"

I asked in return, to which Sena responded by staring up at me with her spoon in her mouth, followed by her going "Hahhh," as she sighed.

"...It's just, like... Geez... It's like, hmm..."

"...Sena?"

"Hmm... Whatever, it's fine."

I drank my drink in confusion, not really sure what exactly was "fine".

Sena then asked, as though it were nothing more than simple chit-chat,

"So like, do you not want a girlfriend?"

That was the question she had posed to me.

I made a wry smile.

"...A girlfriend, huh... I wonder. I don't not want one... I guess?"

"Pretty vague, aren't you?"

Sena pursed her lips slightly.

"Well... That's because my goal right now is making friends, not getting a girlfriend... I doubt a boring guy without a single friend could get a girlfriend anyway."

I said, making a self-derisive laugh.

"...I don't think it'd be that hard."

Sena murmured something in a tiny voice.

"Hm?"

"It's nothing."

Sena said, seemingly angry about something for some reason.

She then leaned back in her chair, looked up at the ceiling, and said,

"Ahh, geez. It's just, like... Hmm... Ahh... Hmm... Ahh, geez... whatever, it's fine!"

"...What the heck's up with you?"

I was a little taken aback, and a little worried about Sena, who was making no sense at all.

Then, all of a sudden,

"...Ah, I know. Hey, speaking of what we think of things..."

"Hmm?"

Sena took her glass in her hand again, and looked over at me.

I hesitated a bit, but then said——

"Umm... W-what do you think about me and Yozora being friends a long time ago?"

I timidly asked about the thing that had been on my mind ever since the rest of the club members found out about it.

"Hm? It's no big deal."

Sena answered me in an incredibly trivial tone of voice.

"No big deal...? That's a pretty nonchalant answer."

"Hmm... Well, I mean, I was kinda flustered after I first heard about it, bu~t I realized it doesn't really matter after I thought about it for a while."

"D-doesn't really matter..."

I felt pretty guilty about hiding it myself...

"I mean, it's all in the past, right? It doesn't matter now."

In spite of her swift dismissal of the past I treasured with the words "it doesn't matter", strangely enough, I didn't feel upset or angry about it.

"You really don't mince words, do you..."

I unintentionally let a wry smile find its way to my face.

"I mean, don't you think it's stupid to be constantly thinking about the past? The present is what matters."

"...You might be right."

I was a little irritated by that triumphant look on her face, like she just said something really smart, but it's true I thought she was exactly right, so I nodded in agreement.

Sena then made a serious face all of a sudden.

"...Although, I don't know what Yozora feels about that..."

She whispered, in a voice tinged with sadness for some reason.

"...Sena?"

"It's nothing~" she said, gulping down the rest of her soda float.

"It's nothing... I just don't plan on losing. That's all..."

I was understanding less and less of what it was Sena was trying to say.

Just then, a text from Rika came.

"Says they're headed to the first floor."

"OK, we should go, too, then."

Sena got up, so I hurriedly finished my lemon squash, and followed after her.

After paying for the drinks (I paid for hers too, as an apology for making her follow me around the cookware section earlier), we left the café, and waited for an elevator.

It was then that Sena started talking again all of a sudden.

"Ah, oh yeah, Kodaka. This is important, so don't forget it."

"Hm?"

Sena stared at me with a piercing gaze that seemed to hold a bit of anger—— and then said, with a serious look on her face,

"There is no way that any human that I, *the* Sena Kashiwazaki, am interested in could be a boring person."

"Eh?"

The elevator came at the exact same time she finished her sentence, and we got into it as though flowing along the line of people who were waiting.

The inside of the elevator was incredibly crowded, and in the end, I never got to ask Sena what she meant by that.

We left Ohtoriya, and arrived at the plaza in front of the building's entrance, which was where we agreed to meet up with Yozora's group.

I found Yozora, Rika, and Yukimura among the crowd, and went t——

"Y... Y... Yooozoooooraaaaahh...!!"

Once she was able to see Yozora, the look on Sena's face changed in an instant as she ran over to her.

"Yozora! You, wha- Seriously, you're so- That's! Come on! You are just, so-!"

"Shut up, Meat... Your yelling is making me feel even worse..."

Yozora made a truly displeased look on her pale face at Sena, who'd run up to her.

"A... A jer, sey...?"

I felt worn out too.

Yozora was wearing a black jersey.

It was a completely black plain jersey that wasn't sexy or fashionable in the least.

Sena stared at Yozora and ground her teeth, half in tears for some reason.

"I was all excited to see what kind of cute clothes you'd pick after giving up on the boyish look, but this... What the heck is that ridiculous outfit that looks like something a girl in some sports club would wear on her way home after practice!?"

"That was actually pretty clever, Sena-senpai..."

Rika made a wry smile, her face just as pale as Yozora's.

"You had the chance to go shopping out here in Nagaya, so why , why would you... buy *that*...!?"

"I found it in the sportswear section. Pretty nice, isn't it? I liked how none of the salespeople come talk to you like they do in a clothes store, too."

Yozora casually said with a sullen expression on her face.

...It looked like she just picked the first thing she saw to me.

"Rika tried to stop her, but..."

Rika sighed with a tired look on her face.

As for what Rika was wearing, she was wearing an ethnic-looking one piece and cardigan combination.

The whole outfit had a very fall-like color to it, which matched her hairstyle quite well, and gave her a slightly more mature look than usual.

"W-what do you think, Kodaka-senpai? I just bought what the salesperson recommended to me, so I'm not too sure."

Rika noticed my gaze, and asked with a faint tint of red to her cheeks while looking up at me.

Honestly, she looked really cute.

"Ah, well, how to put it, umm..."

Crap, I can feel my face heating up.

"Umm... it's like... 'You can do it if you try!' or something."

"...I'll take that as a compliment. Ehe~"

Rika made a slightly complicated look on her face while acting all shy.

"Aniki. What is your opinion of my attire?"

Yukimura, who had been hiding behind Yozora, nervously came out from behind her.

"Y-Yukimura... You- That's..."

Yukimura was wearing the clothes Yozora had had on before we split up.

It was that pair of hot pants that showed off a ton of leg, and that short shirt that left the belly button uncovered.

She'd also changed her shoes from the butler-like ones to a pair of sneakers.

"I received it from Yozora-anego."

Yukimura must've been embarrassed to show off her legs or something, because she was fidgeting with her hands in front of her.

"Yukimura... Yukimura, you..."

"Aniki...?"

Yukimura tilted her head in confusion, her cheeks a shade of red.

"Good job!"

I unintentionally yelled in response to her.

The people around us turned around to look, causing me to panic and lower my voice.

"Ah, umm..... It looks good on you."

The clothes were just Yozora's old ones, but I was still pretty excited in spite of that, because this was the first time I'd ever seen Yukimura in a cute, girly outfit.

The maid uniform is, well, yeah, it's cute, but it's still just cosplay to me.

"Thank you very much, Aniki."

My heart skipped a beat after seeing that tender smile from Yukimura.

"Muu... This is way different than when you saw Rika's clothes.."

Rika complained in displeasure.

"By the way, is that Sena-senpai's present, by chance?"

Rika asked, after seeing the big Ohtoriya bag I was holding.

"Kodaka bought that."

"Ah, so you haven't been carrying Sena-senpai's bags then... What did you buy?"

"A frying pan and a saucepan."

"Hahh...?"

Rika tilted her head in confusion at my response.

"More importantly, we're finally all together, so let's hurry up and go find some presents to buy."

Right after Sena said that,

"I'm going home."

Yozora declared all of a sudden.

"Hahh!?"

"...This town isn't suited for me. I'll just find something decent at a local store."

"Sorry, Rika wants to go home now, too."

Rika said, following Yozora's example.

While thinking to myself that there was nothing we could do about it, considering they're the "bad with crowds combo",

"...Sorry Sena, I want to go home too. I don't want to walk around with these big heavy bags."

"Too bad, it's your own fault for buying two giant saucepans!!"

Sena screamed at me, and then let out a big sigh with a face that looked like she was about to cry.

"Ghhh...! Geez, you're all so... Seriously! Geez! Seriously!!! Why are you all so pathetiiiiiiiicc!?"

...In the end, Sena came home with us.

Hence, although we weren't going home empty-handed, we bid farewell to Nagaya city without buying any of the birthday presents for Kobato we went there to get in the first place (or the meat for tonight's dinner).

Birthday Party (With The Neighbors Club)

And so, the day of Kobato's birthday, October 18th, was upon us at long last.

My fellow club members and I all gathered in the clubroom earlier than usual, and waited for Kobato's arrival.

Maria was the only one who couldn't make it on account of being busy with her work. I did mention the birthday party to her though, so it'd be nice if she could at least pop in for a bit later.

"Hmm, it's finally Kobato-chan's birthday and all, but it feels kinda plain, doesn't it..."

Sena said after looking around the clubroom, seemingly unsatisfied.

This whole thing was pretty spontaneous, so most of the clubroom was left undecorated and in the same general state that it was usually in.

We had a few paper-chains we made hung up here and there, but there were so few that I couldn't deny the dull feel they gave off.

Part of that was because nobody in the Neighbors Club had ever really done much in the way of party decorations, so we had no idea just how much paper we needed, or how much effort it took to actually make a chain.

Aside from the chains, we bought a flower-patterned table cloth for the table, which made it look a bit more festive than usual, and we had a whiteboard with "HAPPY BIRTHDAY KOBATO-CHAN" written on it as well (which was, of course, Sena's doing).

"By the way, Aniki, what does one do at a birthday party?"

Yukimura timidly asked me.

"That's a pretty difficult question..."

I rubbed my temples.

"You give presents, eat cake, and... then what?"

"Perhaps we could all play a game together."

Rika said, answering my question.

"A game, huh... but the only games we have are Meat's galge and Rika's PC games. How are we supposed to play those together ?"

Yozora said with a frown on her face.

"It probably would've been a good idea to prepare some party games ahead of time. There aren't any analog games in the Rika room either..."

"See? I knew we should've bought that Twister set we saw before! I would've had a legal excuse to hang all over Kobato-chan that way too..."

Sena said to me.

Letting someone with hidden motives like her play Twister is something you should never do, if you ask me.

"Isn't there a toy store near school? Let's go buy something real quick. Like Twister!"

"Seriously, just how badly do you want to play Twister..."

"Now that I think about it, we played the King Game back at that after party we had before, didn't we?"

"Uu..."

Our faces all went stiff after hearing what Rika had to say.

That game was a total disaster.

"I'm pretty sure we were confused about what to do at a party back then too... We haven't made any progress since then, have we ..."

As we were mulling things over, my phone started vibrating after having received a text from Kobato.

I told her to let me know when she was coming, so I guess this means she'll be here soon?

I opened up her text and read it.

Title: Kukuku...

Message: Kukuku... I don't want to go.

You gotta be kidding me...

Now that I think about it, Kobato *has* been pretty on edge about the birthday party ever since last night.

This is her first birthday party with people outside her family, so, well, I know how she feels. You really are a shy one, aren't you, Kobato?

That said, we can't do this without the birthday girl here, so I sent her a reply that read, "Just come. We've got a giant cake here."

After I did, the door to the clubroom slowly creaked open, revealing Kobato's face behind it.

Apparently she got all the way out here before starting to chicken out.

Bang!

"Hyah!?"

Kobato ducked and covered her head after being surprised by the sudden noise from the party popper.

The person who popped the popper was none other than Sena.

Everyone else had their own too, and the plan was to pop them all at the same time when Kobato came in, but Kobato's arrival was so sudden only Sena managed to react in time.

...As a result, Sena ended up being the only one who scared Kobato.

"Happy birthday, Kobato-chan!"

"Grrrr~!"

Kobato openly displayed her wariness like that of a stray cat towards Sena, who went to greet her full of energy.

Right after, the sound of a popper going "Bang!" filled the room once more.

This time it was Yukimura, who had a face that said "I might as well pop mine too."

"Hm? Ahh, I'll do it too then..."

Yozora also had a face that screamed "might as well" as she tugged the string on her popper.

It let off a rather weak sounding "bam".

Rika was the next one to pop her popper, and I popped mine shortly after.

Bang...

Bang...

.....What the heck is this?

The way I'd imagined a birthday party in my head was everyone setting off their poppers at once, launching themselves into a festive celebration, but this was nothing close to festive no matter how you look at it.

"...? ...?"

Kobato seemed to be at a loss as well, and looked to me for help .

"...Uhh... OK, I guess we'll eat the cake now."

We gathered around the table with Kobato at the center, and placed the cake box in front of her.

What greeted her after she opened it up, was a lavishly decorated cake full of color topped with chocolate, strawberries, and several other fruits. The second she saw it, Kobato went " Woww..." and her eyes started sparkling.

The rest of us did the same, and went "Wow..." as we exhaled in admiration.

We typically ate a cake when we had the birthday parties at home too, but neither Dad nor I really like sweet stuff that much, so we'd never bought a cake as big as this.

However, while Kobato looked incredibly happy at first, once she saw the chocolate bar on top of the cake that had "Happy Birthday! My Lovely Angel Kobato-chan♥" written on it, she went, "Uu..." and frowned.

Furthermore, below the writing was a drawing of a girl with twintails in a dress and a girl with a butterfly hairpin holding hands and smiling.

Apparently Sena was the one who got the cake, and had Stella bring it to school.

"Well, how is it!? Do you like it!? Kobato-chan!"

Said Sena, who'd taken one of the seats next to Kobato, while making a big triumphant smile on her face.

"...You seriously always take things one step too far..."

Yozora said, in a voice that sounded like she was truly taken aback.

"Eh? What do you mean?"

Yozora directed a look of pity at Sena, who was as happy as could be.

"OK, let's light the candles now!"

Sena and I each took 7 of the 14 candles, and placed them around the edges of the cake before having Yukimura close the curtains and turn off the lights.

I pushed down the switch on the lighter, causing its tiny flame to stand out in the now pitch black clubroom.

After lighting each of the candles, the cake sparkled in the center of the darkness like a gemstone.

The light from the candles shone on Kobato, revealing the fascinated look on her face.

小鳩ちゃん 聖誕祭

"Wow, so this is a real birthday cake, huh..."

Rika let out a voice that sounded full of admiration.

"It is beautiful," said Yukimura.

"Hmph... Not bad, I guess..."

So Yozora said, but the corners of her mouth were raised into a faintly visible smile.

"Alright, now let's sing!"

"Sing...?"

Yozora gave Sena a dubious look.

"Of course. We're gonna sing the birthday song."

"A-song, huh..."

"That's kinda embarrassing..."

"Kodaka, what are you saying!? Put your heart into it and sing for Kobato-chan! OK, here we go! Happy birthd——"

Sena began singing, just as she said she would.

She had a nice singing voice that had a sort of energetic feel to it .

The rest of us couldn't just sit there silent, so we joined her in singing.

I could hear Yozora's reserved singing voice coming from right next to me.

It was a clear, beautiful voice, much different than her usual deep one.

I remembered her voice from earlier this May, back when she was talking to her air friend alone in the classroom.

It might just be me, but I think Yozora's voice right now is how it was meant to be.

Rika's cute singing voice, and Yukimura's plain one were mixed in there as well, creating a chorus with a simple, yet amazingly good feel to it.

"""""""Happy birthday to you,

Happy birthday to you,

Happy birthday, dear Kobato-chwa~n!"

Ko~ba~to~"

Kodaka's little sister~"

Kobato~"

Honored younger sister~"

What!? Come on, this is where we're supposed to match up!! Wouldn't you usually just say "Kobato" here!? I retorted in my head.

"""""""Happy birthday to you!"""""""

We managed to sync up with each other beautifully at the end.

"Ah, Auu..."

Kobato's face went red as she tried to mumble some words.

"Come on, Kobato. Blow out the candles."

"Ah, O-OK."

Kobato hurriedly took a deep breath, and,

"Fuuuuuuuuuu!!"

succeeded in blowing out all 14 candles at once.

After that, I cut up the cake, and we all ate it together.

Once we were done eating, we gave Kobato her presents just like at any other birthday party.

My gift was a new Kurogane no Necromancer game.

Yozora got her a cute handkerchief set.

Apparently she picked it out because it was "something that wouldn't get in the way if she didn't want it", but Kobato seemed to like them all the same.

Rika's gift was a collection of aroma candles.

"They have absolutely no function as an aphrodisiac, so please give them a try with Kodaka-senpai sometime!" was what she said in a strangely emphatic tone, but it was probably just her trying to hide her embarrassment at having got her a simple gift.

Yukimura got her... Ragaraja charms.

The night after we went to Nagaya she sent me a text asking for advice, so I told her "try going with something you'd like getting yourself," but I didn't think she'd get this...

"In truth, I had wanted to get a carving made of cypress wood, but was unable to do so given the spending money I had. I am terribly sorry, Aniki."

"W-well, I think the important thing is that it's a heartfelt gift. Right, Kobato?"

"Kukuku... Magic charms from the Orient are a rarity indeed... I should be able to complete 'that technique' with these in hand..."

Oh? That's a surprise, she seems to really like it...

Next up was Sena, who gave Kobato two kilograms of high grade sukiyaki beef.

"...What, so you ended up going with meat after all?"

I said in a tiny voice, causing Sena to blush.

"S-shut up, I couldn't help it... This is the best thing I could think of... besides, you said you wanted to have some and all..."

"...Meat... this is too masochistic, even for you..."

"This isn't funny, even if you meant it as a joke..."

Yozora and Rika were both thoroughly creeped out.

"It's not a joke!!" yelled Sena in protest.

Well, it's true that she really only wanted to make Kobato happy, so we should just take it with a smile.

"Aren't you happy, Kobato? We're gonna have sukiyaki tonight."

"Sukiyaki... *slurp*..."

Kobato licked her lips at the prospect.

"Uhehehe... Kobato-chan, pretend it's me when you eat it, OK?"

"No!"

Kobato looked like she was about to cry after Sena's creepy remark.

We didn't have anything else to do after giving Kobato her presents, so we decided to end the birthday party there.

I had to get that beef into the fridge soon, so Kobato and I left before the rest of the club members as soon as we finished cleaning up the decorations.

Kobato was carrying a big bag with all her presents in it as we walked home (I said I'd carry it for her, but she said she wanted to do it herself), and looked incredibly happy the whole way back.

Birthday Party (With Kobato And Company)

After going home with Kobato, putting the beef in the fridge, and changing my clothes, I got ready to go out again.

I was planning on buying some other sukiyaki ingredients besides the meat we already have.

"Kukuku... Sukiyaki... Kukuku... Uheheh."

Kobato had put the presents she got from everyone on top of the table, and was now swinging her legs as she sat in one of the chairs with a big grin on her face.

"Man do you look happy..."

I said, letting a wry smile slip out onto my face. Kobato went " Ehe~" and made a cute smile in response.

"Ku, ku, ku... Today's been a good day~"

...Well, if she's this happy about it, then I guess it was worth throwing her a birthday party.

I think I'll send Yozora and the rest of them a text about how happy Kobato is with their gifts later too.

I then left the house with such thoughts in my head, and reached the super market a short while later.

I wondered how much food I'd need to buy while throwing some vegetables and konjac into my basket.

There's no way the two of us would be able to eat all the meat Sena gave Kobato in a single night.

I guess I'll leave half of it in the fridge, and then use the leftovers from dinner tonight to make us some sukiyaki lunches... I can fill Maria's with a ton of meat too.

.....Oh yeah, now that I think about it, Maria never did come, did she...

After finishing my shopping and returning home, I noticed a scooter I'd never seen before lying against the wall around our house.

I figured it must've been a deliveryman or something, but I didn't see anyone like that as I walked up to the front door.

In fact, it wasn't anything close to a deliveryman.

"...What the heck are you doing?"

What I discovered in front of our mailbox near the front door, was a silver haired girl in a sister uniform hunched over like she was trying to curl up into a ball.

"Geh! Onii-chan! Why are you outside!?"

The suspicious girl twitched and jumped up.

It was the Neighbors Club's advisor, Maria Takayama..... 's older sister, Kate Takayama.

Today she had a silver egg-shaped pendant hanging down from her neck, instead of a cross.

"No, that's what I should be asking. What are you hiding over here for?"

I asked Kate with a look of suspicion.

She then straightened herself out, puffed out her chest with pride for some reason (without looking the least bit timid about having been discovered), and responded by saying,

"Isn't it obvious? I was just sneaking a peek at what was going on inside."

"...Did you think that was going to make me let you off the hook ?"

"You won't? Onii-chan."

"I won't."

I immediately replied to Kate, who tried looking up at me with puppy dog eyes.

"To think my little sister attack would be ineffective... You aren't a real Onii-chan, are you...?"

"At the very least, I'm not yours."

I got a little dizzy from how ridiculous she was being, and let out a sigh.

"So, what'd you come here for?"

"Hrmmmm~"

Right as Kate opened her mouth to give me an answer,

"Onii-chan's back!?"

The front door flew open along with an energetic voice, and a girl who looked like a younger version of Kate came flying out at me.

"Oh, hey Maria. Didn't know you were here."

"Yeah, I came to play! Ahaha, I'm back, Onii-chan! I came back just like I said I would! Ahahaha~!"

As with nearly everything else, I have no idea what she finds so fun about this, but anyway, Maria hugged me with a big fat smile on her face.

This marks the second time Maria's come to our house, the first time being over our break after finals, meaning it hasn't even been a month since then.

"Did you have Kate take you here this time?"

"Yeah! That old hag is only useful for stuff like this, isn't she? Ahaha!"

Thunk.

Maria nodded with her face all smiles before Kate drove her fist into her head.

"!? !? !?"

Maria looked shocked, unsure of what had just happened, until she noticed her sister standing next to me, at which point she yelled,

"Gyaaaahhhh!? Why!? Why are you still here, old hag!? You said you'd go home soon! Why are you still here!?"

"I said I'd go home soon, but I never said exactly when 'soon' was, now did I?"

Kate gave a cool answer in response to Maria's screaming.

"Yeah, sure, you didn't say exactly! But you still said soon! I still think soon means you'll do something quick!"

"...Maria, 'soon' is much longer for adults."

"Ehhhh!?"

"For example, people often tell you 'We're having dinner soon,' right?"

Maria's eyes went wide after hearing that.

"Ahhh! They do! They do say that a lot! They always say I can't have snacks because we're eating soon, but we never eat soon at all ..."

"See? You get it now, right?"

"Hrmmm, an adult's 'soon' is pretty vague, huh~"

The edges of Kate's mouth lifted up and formed a smile after having successfully convinced Maria.

"By the way, Maria-chan?"

"Gulp!"

Maria's face went stiff.

"Before I took you to Onii-chan's house, you said 'I will be forever grateful to you, Onee-sama,' did you not? But what was it you said just now? Hmm? I didn't quite catch it... Old...? Hag? I'm only useful for stuff like this...? Just what was it, I wonder~"

"U-umm... Umm, well... How should I say this..."

Kate questioned Maria with a smile on her face, causing Maria to look down at the ground. A cold sweat began to form on her face, and then——

"Umm... Uhh..... Shut up, you shitty old hag!!"

She yelled at the top of her lungs before turning around and sprinting into our house.

"She really is a hopeless little brat..."

I saw Kate sigh as she scratched her head, and said to her,

"But, you were so worried about that brat of a little sister that you'd hide out in front of someone's front door, weren't you?"

"Idi-... I-I wasn't worried about her!"

Said Kate, denying it as she blushed, not with her usual adult attitude, but with that of a simple girl who just can't seem to be honest.

"...So, you want me to let Maria stay here tonight?"

I asked, to which Kate shook her head.

"No. Tomorrow's a weekday and all, so I'll take her home tonight."

"Okay then."

"Anyway, there you have it."

"Ah, wait."

I called out to Kate who was about to leave.

I held up my shopping bag that had a few green onions sticking out of it, and said,

"You might as well have some sukiyaki with us too, since you came all the way out here."

"Sukiyaki!? You mean it!?"

I involuntarily let my gaze towards Kate turn into an affectionate one after seeing her eyes light up as she let out a shout of joy.

Kate's face went red again after noticing that, and she then said,

"I-it's not like I really want to eat sukiyaki that bad or anything though~ Actually, I'm bored of it~ I got bored of it like, two years ago~"

"I see. Well, I won't force you."

"OK, I lied! I want to eat some sukiyaki too!"

"....."

After seeing Kate energetically raise her hand and admit to her lie, I was convinced that she really is Maria's older sister.

Thus, I invited Kate into our house.

"I'm home~... Hm, Kobato?"

Kobato was sitting on the sofa in the living room, hugging a stuffed animal with a dull look on her face.

"It was such a good day... and now it's poop-colored..."

"Ahaha! What are you talking about!? You're so stupid, poop vampire~!"

Maria was happily dancing about near Kobato.

"Fueehhh... An-chaaan..."

Kobato looked over at me with a face that looked like she was about to burst into tears.

Her gaze then shifted to the space behind me.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Kate Takayama. I'm Maria's older sister, and, as you can see, one of the sisters working in the high school division of St. Chronica Academy."

"Auu..."

Kobato, always incredibly shy around strangers, was clearly nervous, and tightly hugged her stuffed animal before giving a faint nod.

Upon seeing Kate standing behind me, Maria went "Gyah!" and let out a brief scream before hiding behind one of the curtains.

Kate decided to ignore her, at least for the time being, and walked up to Kobato.

"So you're Onii-chan's real little sister, Kobato-chan?"

"...Onii... chan...?"

Kobato knit her brows.

"Ah, it's because Maria's always calling him Onii-chan. If he's Maria's older brother, then seeing as how I'm Maria's sister and younger than him, that makes him my Onii-chan too."

For some reason, Kobato's cheeks were twitching and she had a stern look on her face as she listened to Kate talk to her in a tender, amicable tone of voice.

"You're 14-years-old now, right, Kobato-chan? Then does that make me your older sister too? I hope we can get along, since we're both Onii-chan's little sisters and all~"

"Fungyahhhhh!!"

"Uoh!?"

Kobato roared all of a sudden, causing Kate to back off in shock.

Kobato ignored her, and briskly walked over to me.

"A-an-chan!!"

"Y-yeah?"

"An-chan, you're so-! Seriously! You're seriously, so-!! Why do you go and find all these other little sisters all the time!? An-chan ya' big idiot!!"

I wasn't sure how to respond to Kobato, who had just yelled at me with tears in the corners of her eyes.

"Hold on, they're the ones who started calling me that, I didn't really..."

"Uuuuuuu~~!!"

"Come on, calm down for a sec."

I patted Kobato on the head as she glared up at me.

"Nnn..."

She still seemed a little upset, but at least she had quieted down now.

"By the way, why did you come here all of a sudden, Maria?"

I asked Maria, who was hiding behind the curtains, causing her to nervously look over at her sister before coming out.

"That's, well... Muu..."

She glanced over at Kobato (I was still rubbing her head), and made a face that looked upset about something.

"It's 'cause I wanted to play with you, Onii-chan!"

"No it's not."

"Fgyah!"

Kate gently smacked Maria on the head.

"She said she had to talk to Kobato-chan. She went to the clubroom, but you guys had already gone home by then, so she had me take her here."

"Talk to Kobato?"

"Kukuku... Just what manner of business would a pawn of God have with me, the queen of the night...?"

Kate's eyes went wide after seeing Kobato switch into Leysis mode.

"Eh? What's wrong, Kobato-chan?"

"Don't worry about it. She does this every now and then."

"But, still..."

Kobato made a pleasant expression upon seeing Kate's confusion.

"...Ku, ku, ku... I doubt a fool such as yourself possesses the ability to discern the great waves of darkness hidden within me, Leysis vi Felicity Sumeragi..."

"Oh, I see, so she likes to play make-believe?"

I guess it's only natural coming from someone who works as a teacher, but she managed to diagnose Kobato in an instant.

"Ku... kuku... I don't know what you're talking about... My " Chaos Word" must have driven you insane..."

A cold sweat formed on Kobato's cheek as she tried to play it off .

Kate just ignored her and said to Maria,

"Come on, give Kobato-chan her present already."

""Present?""

Kobato and I both said at the same time.

"Fungyahhh!!"

Maria scrunched up her face and yelled.

"Ugahh! Why'd you say it out loud, stupid shitty old poop hag idiot!! You piece of poop!!"

"What's it matter? You're gonna give it to her eventually anyway."

"Uuuuu~~! You are seriously, geez! Poop! You poopy old hag!"

Maria glared at Kate unreservedly, and continued to insult her as she walked over to Kobato and I.

She then reached into the sleeve of her sister uniform, pulled something out, and held it out towards Kobato.

"Hn!"

It was a tiny paper bag with a ribbon tied to it.

"You better be thankful that I'm giving you this!"

Maria said with a small frown on her face. Her cheeks were a tad red.

Kobato looked surprised, and then looked back and forth between the present and me.

"Maria, is this a birthday present for Kobato?"

"Hnnn!"

Maria stuck out the paper bag even further, and shoved it into Kobato's hands.

Kobato timidly accepted the gift, and then stared at it.

"I never thought Maria'd get Kobato a present..."

I said, half out of surprise, and half out of happiness, causing Maria's face to go red.

"Birthdays are important, so I got something for you, even though you're a poop vampire!"

"...H-hmph..."

Kobato's face went red as well, unable to say anything back to Maria in her typical Leysis voice.

"How about you open it up?"

"OK..."

Kobato gently removed the sticker keeping the bag shut, and took out its contents.

The item that was inside the bag was a necklace with a cross on it.

It was the same as the one Maria's always got hanging around her neck.

"Mu..."

Kobato stared intently at the necklace.

"Mu... Muuu... Hohh..."

Kobato opened her eyes wide, and twitched her nose. I'm guessing she likes it.

"Are you sure about this, Maria? Wasn't it expensive?"

"The old hag bought it for me!"

When I looked over at Kate, she made a faint wry smile, and said,

"It wasn't that expensive, don't worry about it. By the way, the St. Chronica Academy store sells crosses, amulets, rosaries, and such at fairly affordable prices. Feel free to use it like you would a normal necklace."

Kate said, as though she were some kind of salesperson.

"I got it 'cause you're evil! You should always wear it so the holy power in it can turn you into a good girl like me!"

Maria said, puffing her chest out and smiling triumphantly.

"Kukuku... Foolish holy woman... A cross is but a decoration to a true ancestor such as myself... Hence, I will be fine, even if I were to wear it forever..."

"What!? At least repent a little bit, you damn poop vampire!"

Maria brandished her own cross and lunged at Kobato.

"Fungyahhhh!! Fghh... Ku... Kukuku... I am the Queen of the Great Darkness, Leysis vi Felicity Sumeragi... Even holy power is easily mastered by one such as I! Funyurahhh!"

Kobato took the cross she'd just received as a present and retaliated with it.

The corner of it hit Maria in the head, causing her to whine about it with tears in her eyes.

"Higyah!? T-that hurt! Why would you hit me with a cross!?"

"Yer' the one who did it first, ya' big idiot!"

"You always say it doesn't work on you so I thought it was OK!"

"Moron! Obviously it'd still work a little bit, ya' big idiot!"

"Really!? How dare you trick me!"

"Kukuku... Such a fool you are to be deceived by my brilliance so easily..."

"Alright, that's enough for now. It's almost time for dinner."

I pulled Kobato and Maria apart before they could begin their never-ending battle between light and darkness.

"Kukuku... I shall overlook your actions this time in deference to my clansman..."

"Dinner!? Onii-chan, what's for dinner tonight!?"

"...Kukuku... Our meal this evening will be the corpse of a black beast covered in blood... I will make an exception this once, and allow you to savor its taste as well..."

"Ugeh!? Why would you eat that!?"

"...You're not technically wrong, but stop describing it like that, Kobato."

I made a small frown and lightly tapped Kobato on the head.

"We're having sukiyaki tonight."

"Sukiyaki!? I know what sukiyaki is! It's that really tasty stuff, right!?"

"Yeah, look forward to it."

"O~K~!"

Maria's eyes were sparkling as I patted her on the head, and then said,

"Alright, guess I'll get started now."

"I-I'll help."

Kobato rarely offers to help on her own (I mean it, it's really rare. I think it's been about three years since the last time she did), so I was surprised to hear her say that.

"Hm... Alright, then wash the saucepan for me."

"OK!"

"Hey~ hey~, Onii-chan! I'll help too!"

Maria energetically raised her hand.

"I see. Alright, then set the table for me."

"OK!"

"...You never help *me* unless I ask you..."

Kate pursed her lips and mumbled something, but I didn't quite catch it.

"Ah, I know. Hey, Kobato."

"Hm?"

"Go thank Maria for the present."

"Ehhh..."

Kobato put on a face that quite clearly said she didn't want to do it, but still looked over at Maria, who was facing the other way, and lowered her head a bit.

"...T... thank... you..."

"Hmm? Did you say something?"

"N-no, you moron!"

We all gathered around the table after all the preparations for our sukiyaki were completed.

Kobato and Maria were both fighting over the meat just like last time.

"Chill out and eat like a normal person."

While she was looking over at Maria and talking, Kate had already stretched her arm out towards the saucepan, and was furiously snatching up meat with her chopsticks.

She had a smile on her face, but there was no trace of that in her eyes as she took care to monitor each piece of meat that was almost done boiling.

"You damn carnivores... There's plenty of meat to go around. Try actually *enjoying* the flavor while you eat it..."

As I tried to take the high road like that, the meat disappeared in the blink of an eye, leaving nothing but vegetables and konjac.

"...I... hardly got to eat any meat..."

I said while hanging my head and nibbling on my green onions.

"Puahhh! That was good~!"

Maria made a satisfied-looking smile.

"Kuku... *burp*... Kuku.... Kukuku...!"

Kobato accidentally burped in the middle of her chuckling, and just kept on chuckling to try and hide it.

"I totally let the hunter blood in me take over there. It would've been even better with some brewskis though~ *BURP*"

"What the heck are you going on about? You're underage anyway."

I said, taken aback by Kate, who just let out a huge burp while slouching back in her chair like it was nothing.

"Come on you two, there's still tons of vegetables and mushrooms left here. Help us finish it all."

""Ehhh~""

Maria and Kobato both let out a voice full of displeasure.

"...If you don't eat it now, I'll use what's left over to make your lunches tomorrow. Are you fine with meatless sukiyaki for lunch?"

"Kukuku... No..."

"Sukiyaki without meat is like poop!"

The two of them hurriedly began scrambling to eat their vegetables.

But, they gave up just as quickly, and left the table to go laze on the sofa.

Shortly after, the two of them fell asleep.

"Come on, don't fall asleep right after you eat..."

Even Kate, who was still trying to help finish the food, said,

"Nnn... I can't eat anymore either... A glass of some cold, light-brown liquid would be nice though, *BURP*"

"We've got barley tea; hang on a sec."

"Grea~t."

I took a bottle of barley tea out of the fridge and poured it into a cup for her.

Upon turning around and looking at Kobato and Maria, who had been fending each other off with the chopsticks every now and then, I got the feeling that Kate was the one who ate the most tonight.

"Puahh! That's the stuff~!"

Kate gulped down the whole cup in one grand gesture, and then wiped the edge of her mouth with the palm of her hand. The way she acted was exactly like an old guy who just chugged down a beer.

"Ahh, I'm all sleepy after eating so much. I don't wanna go home now~ Onii-chan, can we stay over tonight?"

"I don't really mind if you do, but——"

I happened to remember something just then, so I asked her,

"Oh yeah, is that scooter sitting outside yours?"

"Yeeeeep~"

"Oh? So you've got a license and everything, huh."

"I just turned 16 at the end of last month. So, I went to a class and got one real quick."

A childish smile with a hint of pride rose to Kate's face.

She then thinned her eyes a bit, and said,

"I've always wanted... legs to take me far, far away."

I was captivated by that smile of hers that had such a mature air to it you'd never imagine it was coming from a girl one year younger than me.

"Hehe..... ***BURP***"

...Such a waste. In many ways.

"By the way, Onii-chan."

Kate said, while grabbing the egg-shaped pendant hanging down from her neck, and gripping it strongly.

She then opened it up, revealing the transparent glass inside.

Behind the glass, was a brownish colored something.

"Here, look. This is what Maria gave me for my birthday last month."

Kate brought the pendant over to me.

Behind the glass was... umm, probably a... **cicada's shell**... I think? It looked like it was real, not something she made.

"...That's a cicada's shell... right?"

"Yeah, Maria gave it to me."

"Hmm... They sell some weird pendants nowadays."

I said while feeling a little surprised, to which Kate shook her head, and said,

"No no. Maria only gave me the cicada's shell. I had someone I know put it into a pendant for me later."

".....O-oh really..."

I gave a vague reaction, unsure of what exactly I should say at a time like this.

Kate saw that and made a smile that sort of looked like she was about to cry, and then looked over at Kobato lying on the couch before sighing lightly.

"...She gave her an actual pendant though~..."

"How should I say this... You've got it rough, don't you..."

"Yeah, I suppose. Nothing I can do about it though. I'm her big sister after all."

Kate said before letting out a lonely laugh.

"Fnyahh~..."

After finishing dinner and spending about an hour lazing around watching TV with Kate, I did the dishes and got the bath ready, at which point Maria woke up. Kobato was still fast asleep though.

"Alright, guess we'll be going home now," said Kate.

"You're not gonna stay over?"

"Hmm... You sure you don't mind?"

"Don't sweat it. Besides, it's not safe out this late at night."

"You've got a point... I'm still not very used to driving around at night..."

Kate looked like she was thinking things over for a bit, and then said,

"OK, we'll take you up on your hospitality then. Maria, we're staying over at Onii-chan's place tonight."

No sooner had Maria heard Kate's words than she let out a shout of joy.

"Yayy~! I'm staying over at Onii-chan's place! I'm staying over at Onii-chan's place! I got to eat sukiyaki, and now I'm staying over at Onii-chan's place! What a great day! I'm gonna stay up late playing with Onii-chan! Ahaha!"

"Just so you know, I'm staying too."

"Uwaaaaahhh! My good day just turned poop-colored!"

Maria yelled while making a face that looked like （ .

"You've gotta get up early tomorrow anyway. Hurry up and take your bath so you can go to sleep."

"Fine, but I wanna take a bath with Onii-chan then!"

"Dunce, I'm gonna take the chance to give you a good scrubbing . You better be thankful."

"UUUuuu~~!"

"Come on, let's go, Maria."

Kate began dragging Maria off to the bathroom.

"Ugyahhhh! Let go of me, you poopy old haggggg~!"

"You mean, 'Please let go of me, Onee-sama,' right?"

"Please let go of me, Onee-sama!"

"Nope ♥"

"Fungyahhhh!!"

I could hear Maria's screaming and whining all the way in the living room, even after the two of them disappeared into the bathroom.

"...Ah, oh yeah, they need a change of clothes..."

Maria will just have to use Kobato's pajamas like she did last time, and as for Kate... I guess she can use my school t-shirt for now.

I went and grabbed a track suit from my room upstairs, and upon returning to the first floor, I noticed that Kobato was no longer there.

Did she get up to go use the bathroom or something?

I headed for the changing room without paying it much mind, opened the door, and the instant that I did——

"Gyahhhhhhhh!!"

The door to the bathroom flew open along with Kobato's scream, and a completely naked Kobato came flying out.

"Uoh!? Koba... to..."

Taken completely by surprise, my eyes wandered over to what was behind Kobato—— that is to say, the entrance to the bathroom .

Maria was sitting there on a bath stool, covered in bubbles, with only her face turned towards me.

And right next to her—— was Kate Takayama, completely naked.

She was facing me with a body towel and shower head that was still shooting out hot water in hand.

I'm guessing she was in the middle of rinsing Maria off.

Her silver hair was all wet, and the hot bath water was dripping off of her slightly flushed skin that was so white as to be near-transparent.

Her limbs and waist were thin, but not unhealthily so, and her breasts were of an exquisite size.

She is unparalleled in her beauty—— I doubt that anyone could object to describing her as such, for the naked girl standing before me had such perfect proportions it could almost be considered a miracle.

Kate stood frozen stiff with a shocked expression on her face for a short while, but soon after she covered her chest with one hand while blushing, and then directed an accusatory gaze at me.

"...You're so naughty, Onii-chan."

"I-I-I-I'm sorry!"

I hurriedly did an about face, and continued on, saying,

"I-I-I-I'll leave your c-change of clothes right here! I-i-i-it's a track suit! My track suit! I-I-I-I'll be going now!"

After stuttering over my words more times than I can count, I left the changing room as though running away.

A short while later,

"...So, whaddaya have to say in your defense?"

"I'm sorry."

We were in the kitchen, standing in front of the fridge.

I bowed my head deeply to Kate, who had gotten out of the bath, and was now wearing my track suit.

Kate took a big gulp of her cola with one hand on her waist, and after going "Puahhh!" as she exhaled happily, she said,

"OK, I forgive you."

"What!? That's it!?"

She forgave me so easily I couldn't help but make a retort.

Kate made a wry smile, and explained,

"It's not like you peeked on purpose, right?"

"O-of course I didn't!"

"Thought so. There's no point in getting mad at you then."

She then took another gulp of her cola and let out a big burp.

"Besides, I like the way you're honest about it and don't try to make excuses. You could've said it was all Kobato-chan's fault, but you didn't."

By the way, Kobato was currently taking a bath, and Maria had passed out on the couch again right after she finished taking hers.

"...It's not like I'm trying to cover for her... I just felt like I did something bad to you..."

Kate giggled and made a tiny smile.

"You really are a good guy, aren't you, Onii-chan? I can see why Pegasus likes you."

"Huh? The chairman?"

I was a little confused about why she brought him up all of a sudden.

Pegasus—— Pegasus Kashiwazaki, is St. Chronica Academy's chairman, as well as Sena's father.

"Yeah. Chairman Pegasus Kashiwazaki. He talks about you a lot too. I hear he's called you over to his house a few times now."

"Well, yeah. He has... do you get along with him or something?"

"Pretty much. Pegasus is my fishing buddy."

"Fishing buddy?"

Kate smiled happily after hearing my question.

"Yeah. He likes fishing for salmon especially. We go out together when we have the time."

"You don't say... I never knew the chairman fished..."

I was pretty surprised. I'd always thought of him as the kind of guy who doesn't focus on anything other than his work.

"Salmon's good stuff ya' know~ I don't care what anyone says, it always tastes good when ya' eat it."

"Yeah, salmon is pretty good, isn't it..."

Now that I think about it, we had salted and grilled salmon that one time I ate at Sena's place. I wonder if the chairman caught that himself.

"By the way, do you fish, Onii-chan?"

"Hm, Dad took me a few times back when I was a kid."

Dad would always catch a ton while I never even got a single bite though, so I can't say I had much fun with it.

"I see~! Let's go together sometime then!"

"Alright... sure."

I gave my consent to Kate, who happily invited me along.

It was early morning the next day.

I was seeing off Kate and Maria, who were heading back to the academy.

Kobato was still asleep in her room, and while Maria was up and walking around, it looked like she was still half-asleep. I'm still pretty tired myself, since I'm usually not even up this early.

"OK, see you later then, Onii-chan~"

"...Mnyah... Yeah... Bye bye, Onii-chan..."

"Yep. See you at school, 'kay?"

I said to Maria with a wry smile, as she gave me a sleepy wave with her helmet on.

"...Hahhh."

Kate looked back at me after mounting her scooter, and then made a smile that had a hint of sadness in it as she let out a sigh in the cold air.

"...?"

"It's nothin'. I was just thinking how nice it would've been... if you were really our older brother. Or maybe..."

Kate's cheeks went red in the middle of her talking.

"...Or maybe something even more than that... I think I'd actually kinda like that... No point in thinking about it when you've already got Sena though, I suppose."

"Huh?"

What does Sena have to do with anything?

Right before I could ask that, Kate hurriedly threw her helmet on.

She put Maria on the back seat, and then glanced my way and gave a little wave before stepping on the accelerator.

I was still suspicious of what she said, but I waved anyway, and watched as their scooter disappeared into the distance.

"Wow~" I said, accidentally letting a voice of admiration out.

I wish I had a scooter... Maybe I should get a bike license too...

I then walked back inside while entertaining such thoughts without a care in the world.

However, it would not be long until I knew the meaning behind the latter half of Kate's words—— before learning what it was she meant by "No point in thinking about it when you've already got Sena though, I suppose."

The End.